ACT I: PERSEPHONE DESCENDS UNTO THE UNDERWORLD

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ACT I: PERSEPHONE DESCENDS UNTO THE UNDERWORLD

by skeletontwins

Summary

Will Graham, an awkward senior spending his final year of high school on exchange in Tuscany, meets charming socialite Hannibal Lecter. A whirlwind romance ensues, despite Will's reservations.

Notes

Though it's not illegal in New York, where this Will is from, nor Italy, where this fic takes place, I've tagged this underage because Will is 17 and Hannibal is in his early 20s, which is icky. This isn't meant to explore a healthy, normal relationship and I want people to be able to filter this story out to their needs. Please correct my god awful Italian.

CHAPTER I

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will Graham does not fit in. He is, by all accounts, strange and off-putting.

Will had thought the exchange program included in his scholarship might be an opportunity to escape high school somehow, as though Italy would be world's different from Guillaume, his own boarding school in America. *An opportunity*. His father's words. *An opportunity to get out of your comfort zone*. Just last spring, Will had scoffed and privately thought that his 'zone' would never be comfortable. But Spring turned into Summer and as the deadline to sign up for the program approached, the grimy and infectious nature of New York City set in on Will. He decided, ultimately, that he'd take his chances with Italy. He'd *hoped*, even, that things would be better.

Will shakes out the contents of his bulky black messenger bag onto his bed and begins rummaging in search of his Biology textbook. It was free to get but would cost a fortune to replace, and Will simply can't afford to lose it. Finally, he ducks down to look under his sturdy bed and finds the damn thing, collecting dust. Will reaches under the bed to retrieve the book and brushes it off reverently. Although his hopes of achieving some sense of harmony in his new environment had been dashed, nothing could ruin IB Biology for Will. He tucks the book into his bag gently, between unfilled notebooks.

Before leaving, he takes a look around his sparsely decorated room. It's the top floor, one of the few singles, with its own ensuite. Easily one of the nicest rooms available. Will can't help but feel it's wasted on him, though he's very grateful for St. Gabriel's accommodation.

He leaves, walking quickly from the boys' dorm to the science wing, tugging uncomfortably at the stiff collar of his uniform. *At least I* look *like everyone else,* Will thinks sardonically, though he knows he really doesn't. The hems of his dress pants perpetually drag on the ground, his unruly curls stick out in a peculiar way, and his face is all at once too masculine and too feminine, too grown up and too boyish.

"*Lo strambo*," a student says as Will passes him in the hall, not even bothering to whisper. The girl he's speaking to giggles and Will scowls.

It doesn't matter. He picks up the pace and arrives at his destination in record time. He tugs the door open, already a little giddy. The teacher is a sharp, kind woman, who Will pretty much considers a genius. Today she's going to be running through the basics of an autopsy, which isn't even part of the curriculum. She says she does this every year to root out the students with weak stomachs. Will can't wait. He doesn't care how morbid it makes him, he walks into the room bouncing on the balls of his feet.

He's the first one there except for Professoressa Silva and… a stranger. Will looks at the stranger that Prof. Silva is talking to curiously. The man is too young to be a teacher but definitely not a student. Will already has the other seniors memorized but even without an

eidetic memory, he couldn't forget this man's face. His features are striking and unusual and should be eerie but are, instead, overwhelmingly beautiful. Will finds himself unable to stop staring at the man's high cheekbones, at his pink, full mouth. The man turns his head and catches Will's eye. His eyes are deep brown, almost maroon, and Will looks away quickly. Prof. Silva notices his presence for the first time.

"Will!" She exclaims, switching from low Italian to English for his benefit. He wants to remind her that he speaks Italian just fine, but finds himself incapable of saying anything in any language in the presence of the stranger, whose eyes twinkle. "This is my star pupil, Will Graham," Prof. Silva introduces him, beckoning him closer. Will crosses the room obediently and the man tracks him closely. Will feels hot under his gaze. "Will," Prof. Silva continues, "This is Dottore Lecter, my former student."

"Hello," Will manages.

The man— *Dr. Lecter*, looks as though he knows exactly the effect he has, and nods his head in greeting. "You must be quite the scholar," he says in a lilting accent that Will can't place, "to have won the affections of Professoressa Silva." Decidedly not Italian, but certainly European. Will watches him with wide eyes.

Prof. Silva bats Dr. Lecter's chest. "How many times must I ask you to call me Alfonsina?"

He smiles in a charming, self deprecating manner and holds his hands up in surrender. "Apologies, Alfonsina. It will not happen again."

Prof. Silva smiles. "You are forgiven," she says, tongue-in-cheek.

Will feels like a voyeur and is grateful when Prof. Silva notices the other students pouring into the classroom.

"Sorry, Hannibal," she says, then smiles warmly at Will. He ducks his head and walks back to his desk and Prof. Silva claps her hands together.

"*Cominciamo*," she says, her voice ringing throughout the room. The man doesn't leave, but stands at Prof. Silva's side and scans the room, politely smiling at each student. Will watches him, barely hearing Prof. Silva introduce the autopsy lesson in fast-paced Italian. Will feels like all the light in the room is shining on Dr. Lecter. He catches her introducing the man as an alum and a personal friend, as well as a local prodigy in the world of medicine, who will be guest lecturing today. When Dr. Lecter adds that he's no pathologist, Prof. Silva says that she'd trust Dr. Lecter to perform her autopsy any day.

"May I never get the chance," Dr. Lecter says in English. The class ripples with laughter.

Dr. Lecter pops a hand labeled VHS tape (Will notes a neat, dancing script, undoubtedly belonging to Dr. Lecter himself) into the tape deck and a video begins to play.

Most of the screen is taken up by a corpse, white male with no visible tattoos, dressed in a white undershirt, grey socks, and khaki pants, with a brightly colored Band-Aid on the forearm, laid out on a stainless steel table. The video then cuts to the same corpse without

clothes, still no tattoos, no scars, the minor abrasion on the forearm now visible, and a faint tan line on the ring finger. Then, the video cuts again and the corpse is in a new location, the naked torso arched on a rubber block. Dr. Lecter, visible only from the shoulders down, appears in the video, holding a scalpel. The Dr. Lecter standing in the room in the present narrates as the Dr. Lecter of the video makes the first Y-incision, the arms of the Y running from each shoulder joint to meet at the midpoint of the chest and the stem running down the length of the abdomen and stopping at the pelvic bone. The Dr. Lecter of the video peels the flaps of skin back and brings out a rib cutter. The ribs are cut along the line connecting them to the cartilage with a shear and though there's no audio in the video, Will swears he hears the snapping sound. However, he doesn't find himself disgusted or unnerved. He watches, rapt. Dr. Lecter removes the pieces of rib bone and picks up the scalpel again, freeing the intestines. The Dr. Lecter standing in the room talks through each organ, explaining how the liver and heart were affected by extensive current and previous alcohol use, then goes on to cover the toxicology report as the Dr. Lecter on the screen weighs the internal organs. Dr. Lecter explains that there were slightly abnormal levels of alcohol in the bloodstream and a low blood pressure.

Finally Dr. Lecter asks the class to posit the C.O.D. Most students raise their hands, despite the fact that Dr. Lecter assures them no one has ever deduced the answer. A few of them talk themselves in circles without coming to a conclusion and Will can't hold them to it; he sympathizes with their desires to impress Dr. Lecter by any means necessary. One of them guesses alcohol poisoning. Will rolls his eyes. He's half tempted to tell the kid that a long time alcoholic would have to drink a truly obscene amount of alcohol to die from it. *Not that it's impossible* , Will thinks. *It just didn't happen*. Which the kid would know if he had paid attention to Dr. Lecter going over the tox. report.

A pretty girl with long, sandy blonde hair, who actually smiles at Will most days, raises her hand. "*Suicidio*," she says. "*Era divorziato*." The girl explains the thin, pale ring around the man's ring finger, belonging only to someone who wore a wedding band for a very long time to Dr. Lecter in Italian. Will can read that Dr. Lecter's impressed, but that her theory isn't quite right. Will frowns at the dark wood, picking at the grain.

"Will," Dr. Lecter says.

Will's head jerks up and he accidentally locks eyes with Dr. Lecter. Impossibly, he finds it difficult to look away.

"Do you have any thoughts?" Dr. Lecter asks.

"Uh," Will falters awkwardly, "accidental death."

"Please, elaborate."

The room melts away and Will sees the corpse before his eyes, living, breathing. The corpse gives a rueful smile. Will feels a shiver go through his body and then, with the melting and unsure kind of continuity that occurs only in dreams, Will is no longer himself. He's… he's *sad* . He's alone and he's hurting but… Will shakes his head, or tries to. Moving feels lethargic and sticky. *None of this is right* , Will thinks. There are better things on the horizon, he knows. He hears a sick cracking sound, the rib bones splitting, and looks down to see his

chest opening up. Inside the cavity is a red, beating heart. Will reaches inside himself, the pulse calling him. He feels sick in his chest. *There's something wrong with me* , Will thinks deliriously, unsure which 'me' he's referring to. Before he gets his cold, clammy fingers on the heart, the image dissipates. Will blinks his eyes to see the whole class looking at him. Most of his focus is on Dr. Lecter, though, who is watching, rapt, as though Will's done something interesting, and not spent the last fifteen seconds staring into space. "Uh," Will repeats intelligently, feeling hollowed out. "He was divorced— not recently, but he still spent time with his daughter." Will's brow furrows and he considers the heart. There's something wrong with it. "A high functioning alcoholic," he says, "with a heart condition. He died of an arrhythmia after combining hard liquor with antihypertensives."

"You have ruled out suicide?"

Will doesn't have an answer for him, feeling disorientated, as though his head's on the wrong body, or vice versa. "He wasn't suicidal." Dr. Lecter's eyes shine and he looks at Will like he's the only person in the room. Will has the cartoonish urge to tug the collar of his stiff button up. Dr. Lecter, without warning, looks back at the rest of the class. Will misses Dr. Lecter's gaze as soon as it's not on him.

"*Cosa ti avevo detto*?" Prof. Silva whispers to Dr. Lecter, her voice carrying in the silent room.

"Signore Graham is correct," Dr. Lecter says. "Signore Lombardi's death was ruled an accident based on his personal history and the pathologies found in his autopsy." He begins to pace the length of Prof. Silva's large oak desk. "He suffered from hypertension and was recently prescribed a combination of alpha and beta blockers. This medication, as well as a reasonable amount of hard alcohol, were found in his home, open. He had no history of self harming behavior and was slated to gain custody of his daughter in the spring. Signore Lombardi did not commit suicide," Dr. Lecter looks at the blonde girl, "though it was a very good theory." The blonde girl smiles to herself, then looks back to Will meaningfully. Will can feel that she's… *stirred,* but he isn't able to interpret her look.

Class ends soon after that and Will waits the other students out, not wanting to get caught in the scuffle of people leaving the room and hoping to avoid Prof. Silva and Dr. Lecter, feeling embarrassed in the aftermath of the autopsy. *Embarrassed*, Will thinks*, and about a million other things*. Will feels as though he transformed into a werewolf in front of his senior class and is now expected to shuffle out the door in his ragged and torn clothes, wounded and exposed.

It appears Dr. Lecter is waiting *him* out, though, as once the classroom empties, Dr. Lecter catches him in the doorway. "That was quite the display, Mr. Graham." Will's still glowering. *Thanks to you*, he wants to say.

He says nothing and keeps his eyes down.

"Not fond of eye contact, are you?"

Will looks up, a little surprised. "No, sir," he says, then cringes and curses his unwieldy approximation of manners, which visit only when he's feeling embarrassed. Dr. Lecter's

expression is foreign to Will. He looks… pleased? Intrigued? His eyes really are very distracting. Will looks back at the ground. “Your eyes have a very uncommon color.” Will vocalizes honestly, “I find them distracting.”

Dr. Lecter laughs, not unkindly. “Professoressa Silva tells me you intend to return to America at the end of the year?” Will nods, scuffing the toe of his boot against the ground. “What a shame.” Dr. Lecter has a smile that reminds Will of a shark. He feels antsy to leave. It’s not so much that he dislikes Dr. Lecter, but more so the effect Dr. Lecter has on him.

Will realizes Dr. Lecter’s still speaking to him. “Sorry, what?”

Dr. Lecter smiles indulgently. “I asked if I may take you to lunch?” Will swallows. “Perhaps I can change your mind about leaving the country.”

Will hesitates. “I’m not allowed off campus before four,” he says. “I could get in trouble.” He hates how young he sounds but is interested in getting back to his barren dorm.

Dr. Lecter leans in and says, conspiratorially, “You will face no trouble so long as you are my companion.” Will tries, for a split-second, to get a sense of what Dr. Lecter feels. It’s like coming up against a brick wall.

I think we are… mutually *intrigued,* Will decides. “Okay,” he agrees.

Dr. Lecter drives a black Benz coupe. Will is not surprised, to say the least.

He is surprised when Dr. Lecter opens the door to the passenger side and looks at Will expectantly. Will catches his eye as he gets into the car and Dr. Lecter smiles at him again. Will didn’t notice him smiling this much at anyone else, even Prof. Silva. Will studies the dash of the car and is completely unable to work out why. Whatever it means, Will touches his face self consciously and wishes he’d thought to shave this morning.

The ride is mostly silent, though Will doesn’t feel it’s an uncomfortable silence. He *likes* Dr. Lecter. That’s the issue. He feels comfortable, unguarded, *lulled* , in Dr. Lecter’s presence, and he’s getting the impression that Dr. Lecter knows just how vulnerable Will is to him already.

“*Preferisci l'italiano*?” Dr. Lecter asks before they get to the restaurant. “Or English?”

Will shrugs. “I’m better at English.”

“Proficiency is not preference.”

Will looks out the window. “I prefer French,” he says. The throaty sounds of it remind him of being young, falling asleep on a mattress in the living room to the sound of his upstairs neighbors talking loudly.

“*Mois aussi*,” Dr. Lecter says in a nearly perfect French accent.

Will smiles and shakes his head. “*Non*,” he says. “*Français de la Louisiane*. Cajun-French.”

“Ah,” Dr. Lecter says, pulling into an empty spot in front of a tiny bistro. “A red-blooded American, Mr. Graham. Perhaps English is best, in that case.”

Will wonders silently about the color of Dr. Lecter’s blood, but he’s out of the car before Will has the opportunity to ask. They share an awkward moment where Will begins to open the door while Dr. Lecter’s on the other side, also trying to open it. Will notices him in time, though, and stops before he actually bashes the good doctor in the torso.

Dr. Lecter opens the door fully. “We must practice that,” he says, his smile good natured.

Dr. Lecter opens the door to the restaurant for him, too.

Will’s glad to see it’s a friendly, non-ostentatious atmosphere with very few people; he’s not underdressed in his uniform, even once the maître d’ takes his coat. Will had been slightly worried about what, exactly, Dr. Lecter had in mind for a casual lunch. Something about the way he carries himself, and certainly the way he dresses, screams wealth. It’s not too much though, furthered by the fact that the maître d’ seats them in a private table, sequestered away from the other guests. Will isn’t sure if it means Dr. Lecter has read him that well, or if this is a courtesy he shows all of his… What was the word he used? *Companions* .

They take their seats and Dr. Lecter asks, “How old are you, Will?”

“Seventeen,” Will answers. “Eighteen in December.”

“Seventeen,” Dr. Lecter repeats. “A transformative time. You have formed your chrysalis, and the world eagerly awaits what emerges.”

“If the world is hoping for a butterfly,” Will says, “they’ll be nursing disappointment.” Dr. Lecter chuckles. Will looks down at the table and finds it clear. “Is there a menu?” he asks, feeling slightly stupid for asking.

“If I may order for you…” Dr. Lecter begins, not answering the question.

“I’d like a menu,” Will stops him bluntly. A blank look passes briefly over Dr. Lecter’s face, completely void of feeling, eerie. Will feels a chill go through him but doesn’t look away.

Dr. Lecter’s face returns to its regular, charming veneer and he says, “Of course,” easily. He calls the maître d’ to their table and asks for two menus. Will’s sure he’s being an inconvenience, as the maître d’ rushes back to their tables, menus in hand, but he can’t bring himself to regret it. *It would be more of an inconvenience to have a public meltdown over unfamiliar food* , he decides. The thought of a meltdown in the presence of Dr. Lecter makes him shudder.

Will expects Dr. Lecter, like all adults, to ask what he plans to do after high school in the short silence that follows, and waits with the word ‘academy’ on his tongue. Dr. Lecter surprises him by asking, “What is your passion?”

“My *passion*,” Will repeats like it’s a dirty word and a roused look passes over Dr. Lecter’s face. “Is that something you *find* or… *cultivate*?”

“Those unable to find passion put a great deal of energy into cultivating it,” Dr. Lecter says. Will picks up on his habit of answering a question without really answering and is stimulated by it. *Makes the answer all the more exciting*, Will thinks.

Out loud, he asks Dr. Lecter, “Speaking from experience?”

“I was delivered to the doorstep of my passions,” Dr. Lecter says brightly and Will leans forward but before Dr. Lecter can elaborate, the maître d’ arrives, apologizing for the wait (*What wait?* Will thinks) and asks for their drink orders.

“*Vorrei un bicchiere d’acqua*,” Will says, giving a strained smile.

Dr. Lecter’s voice is smooth and charming. “*Un negroni sbagliato, e—* ” Dr. Lecter hands the menu back to the maître d’ and orders an elaborate Italian dish Will doesn’t understand. “*Grazie*,” he thanks the maître d’ warmly.

Will realizes the maître d’ is looking at him expectantly and quickly scans the menu, finding one of his comfort foods with little difficulty. “*Papa al pomodoro*,” Will says.

Will doesn’t miss Dr. Lecter’s flash of dismay before the maître d’ nods and, with a short, “*Certo*,” disappears.

He returns shortly after with their drinks; Will swears he’s never seen waitstaff move this quickly.

“Your, um,” Will says in the succeeding silence, clearing his throat. “Your passions?” he prompts.

Dr. Lecter rewards him with a pleased smile. “*L’art*,” he says. “My aunt, the Lady Murasaki, raised me from the time I was a boy and fostered in me an appreciation of beauty. Do you have a family, Will?”

Will likes the way Dr. Lecter says his name, even when the question puts a vaguely bitter taste in his mouth. “I live with my father,” he says, “in the summers.”

Dr. Lecter looks down at his glass of sparkling wine and some bright, orange juice. “My family has suffered many tragedies, leaving only Murasaki and I, and then only myself.” Dr. Lecter looks up and Will maintains eye contact, feeling as though Dr. Lecter pulls him apart, in every direction. “You mention your father, Will, and no one else. I imagine you are no stranger to tragedy.”

Despite Dr. Lecter’s clear implication that he and Will are on par, Will feels sympathy for Dr. Lecter that he does not feel for himself . Will shakes his head. “My father taught me to fix boat motors, to fish, to sail.” Dr. Lecter’s eyes shift into an inky black in the low light of the intimate bistro. “I guess that’s my passion,” he says.

“The rituals through which males bond are intricate and significant.” Hannibal holds eye contact as though it’s a victory. “Would you describe your relationship with your father as ‘close’?”

Will rolls his eyes. “Are you asking if I have daddy issues?”

Dr. Lecter’s smile is not quite there. He narrows his eyes. “I take it you are familiar with cognitive behavioral therapy.”

Will taps his nose with his pointer finger. “Unfortunately,” he says. “I’m on the autism spectrum. There’s no cure,” he thinks to add.

“Of course,” Dr. Lecter says. “There is nothing wrong with you.”

There’s a lull in the conversation to accommodate Will’s surprise. He doesn’t think anyone’s ever said those words, in that order, to him before. Feeling brave, he asks, “Where is your aunt now?” He knows, somehow, that she’s alive.

“I gave her my word I would never find out.” His tone and expression are unreadable. “That was all she asked of me.”

Will doesn’t question further, feeling as though he already pushed too far.

Instead, he asks, “Do you believe in art without beauty?” thinking of what Dr. Lecter said earlier, the curious way he phrased it.

“No,” Dr. Lecter answers shortly. “All art should be beautiful, or it is simply noise.”

“You strike me as someone… *unforgiving* of noise.”

Dr. Lecter makes no concession, and matches Will exactly. “And you, Will,” he says, “strike me as someone who is particularly quiet.” Dr. Lecter watches Will over his glass and Will watches Dr. Lecter’s throat work as he swallows. “Had I not called on you after the autopsy, I fear you would not have shared your conclusions with us whatsoever.”

Will grits his teeth. “Some would use the word ‘shy’,” he says.

“And others?” Dr. Lecter asks, his expression cool and curious.

Will gives him a wry smile. “*Strange*.”

Will has no expectations for the food, considering the simplicity of the dish he ordered. He’s certainly *not* expecting the best tomato soup he’s ever tasted. The flavor floods his mouth, rich and creamy and sweet. He can taste the hints of basil and other, indiscernible herbs, but mostly it just tastes comfortable and *warm*. His eyes flutter closed for a moment and when he opens them Dr. Lecter is staring at him, enthralled. He hums around the spoon. “*Oh my god*,” he says emphatically, setting the spoon back in the bowl. “Dr. Lecter, you have to try this.”

Dr. Lecter gives him a doubtful, amused look before leaning forward. He locks eyes with Will and, without his own permission, Will lifts a spoonful to Dr. Lecter's mouth. Will watches, now unable to move. Will catches himself looking at Dr. Lecter's mouth. His face burns red as Dr. Lecter leans back in his seat, looking satisfied.

"I hadn't…" Will begins but has nothing to say. He *had*, hadn't he?

"You must allow me to cook for you," Dr. Lecter says calmly, seemingly apropos of nothing. Will's head is still spinning from Dr. Lecter's mouth, so close to his hand, and he realizes his own mouth is hanging open. He shuts it.

Oh my god, Will thinks deliriously. *Why did I ask him to do that? Holy shit.* Will comes back to himself. "What?"

Dr. Lecter looks like a predator who toys with his prey. He leans forward again and says, lowly, "I would like to have you for dinner."

"You're very young to be a doctor," Will says as they walk back to the car, a thick glass tupperware of soup in Will's hands (the chef was a personal friend of Dr. Lecter's, and very flattered by Will's appetite).

"You are very young to be a budding pathologist."

Will gives him a sidelong look. It's diminished by the fact that his face is still pink. "You're very *avoidant*," he says.

Dr. Lecter laughs out loud. He opens the passenger door to the Benz and Will ducks in. Dr. Lecter settles into the driver's seat next to him and starts the car. Without looking, he says, "I graduated very early. I was lucky enough to have many professors who trusted in my prospects and vouched for me."

"I'm sure charm and wealth had nothing to do with it."

Dr. Lecter laughs again. His laugh is clear, and higher than his speaking voice. Will feels a warm pride each time he hears it. "Unprejudiced honesty is a virtue, Will."

Will grins. "As is charm and wealth, Dr. Lecter."

Dr. Lecter glances at him. "You may call me 'Hannibal'," he says.

Will wrinkles his nose. *Hannibal.* It's a peculiar name, but fits him perfectly. Still, 'Dr. Lecter' is a habit Will knows he's unlikely to break. "I like 'Dr. Lecter'," Will says frankly.

"As you wish."

The drive back to St. Gabriel is short and it occurs to Will this was likely intentional on Dr. Lecter's part. *Maybe he thought I'd bail*, Will infers.

Will finds himself hesitant to leave the car. He lingers in the passenger seat, uncertain as to what to say. Dr. Lecter must feel the same, as he makes no move to leave the car and open the door for Will.

“This may be inappropriate,” Dr. Lecter says, pausing.

Will twists his body and leans back against the passenger door so he can face Dr. Lecter fully. He raises his eyebrows, urging Dr. Lecter on.

“Would you accompany me to dinner?” Dr. Lecter asks. Will disregards the inkling of anxiety he hears in Dr. Lecter’s voice as misinterpretation.

“You already asked me that,” Will points out.

“You did not say yes,” Dr. Lecter returns.

“I meant to,” Will says quietly. Dr. Lecter cocks his head curiously. “I want to—” and Will almost says no. He almost turns Dr. Lecter down on principle, out of propriety, out of fear of how badly he wants to say yes. But Dr. Lecter looks at him like what he wants is the only thing that matters and he can’t help himself. “Okay,” Will says, agreeing once again to Dr. Lecter’s suggestions.

Dr. Lecter looks extremely gratified, but still makes no move to leave the car. Will turns around to open his own door, but Dr. Lecter interrupts him.

“You understand, of course,” he says, “that your current wardrobe is unacceptable.”

Will turns around. “Excuse me?”

He doesn’t have time to point out that Dr. Lecter has known him for *one day* , before Dr. Lecter continues, “I am happy to provide the admissible attire.”

Will’s glaring at him. “Absolutely—” *not*, Will’s about to say.

“It would be rude to decline at this point.” Something about Dr. Lecter’s cold, toneless voice, the way he says the word ‘rude’… Will swallows. His hands twitch around the tupperware container. “I assure you,” Dr. Lecter says, taking Will’s silence as concurrence, “it will be a painless process.” He gives Will a sharp smile. “So long as you behave yourself.”

Chapter End Notes

Lo strambo: The weirdo.
Cominciamo: Let's begin.
Suicidio. Era divorziato: Suicide. He was divorced.
Cosa ti avevo detto: What did I tell you?

CHAPTER II

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will's favorite spot on campus is a tiny patch of grass with a single, gnarled tree behind the boys' dormitory. It's empty of students except for Will, which is only one of its merits, the other being the fantastic sunsets over the hills in the distance, turning all the barren trees and browning grass honey-colored. Will's curled up at the base of the tree, bundled in his shabby winter clothes, waiting patiently for sunset.

"Will!"

Will looks up from his English Lit assigned reading at the pretty blonde girl from Biology, who's calling his name. She's out of uniform, dressed all in navy blues and maroons, with a wool scarf wound around her neck, her shiny hair tucked in and her face barely peeking over. She walks towards him, then breaks into a light jog. At the last minute she trips. Will lunges forward in an effort to catch her but he's too late. She lands hard on her knees and palms.

"Are you okay?"

She giggles. "*Sì, sì*," she says. "I'm okay. Gioconda." She sticks her raw hand out to shake. Will takes it, begrudgingly, gently. "My friends call me Gio."

Her Italian accent is thick and beautiful. Will's sure his American accent is an affront, so he follows her lead and sticks to English. "You're hurt." He points to her scraped knee, visible through the torn hole in her tights.

She smiles at him. "Walk me to the infirmary?"

Will does. She's limping slightly, though she never stops smiling. A few times, she stumbles, and catches herself on Will's arm.

"You knew Lombardi was divorced," Will says.

"Lombardi… the dead man?" Will nods. They've made their way to infirmary, nestled between the science buildings and the front office. Will opens the door for her. "You knew everything else about him."

"I have an empathy disorder."

She gives him a look. "You're smart," she says, as though one doesn't negate the other.

The nurse bustles out from behind a door and smiles kindly at them, more so to Gio. "*Posso aiutate?* " she asks.

Gio points at her knee and explains that she fell. The nurse tells her it's no worries, just needs a small bandage.

“Well…” Will begins, struggling to find a way to leave gracefully. “Goodbye,” he settles on.

Gio gives him a quizzical look. She pulls her glove back to check her watch. “It’s almost, ah, three.” She doesn’t acknowledge his ‘goodbye’. “Are you finished with your classes for the day?”

Will nods in assent, unsure where she’s going with this.

She claps her hands together. “Great! Let’s go out after she fixes my knee, okay?”

Will looks at her for a moment. She must’ve noticed he doesn’t make eye contact, because she doesn’t try to. She smiles in his direction.

“Why?” Will asks.

She tilts her head. “Because I like you,” she says simply. “I want to be friends.”

Will feels vaguely suspicious of her. The few times he thought he had a friend as a young child he realized later he was being treated as a pet. He remembers vividly the sick-stomach feeling of putting everything together.

But whatever she feels for him, he knows it isn’t amusement, or the kind of dehumanized adoration you might feel for a puppy. She likes him. She wants to be friends.

“Coffee?”

He didn’t think it was possible, but she smiles even wider and nods enthusiastically. “I know all the best cafés,” she tells him.

The day before Will’s appointment with Dr. Lecter's tailor, Gio gives him a serious look and asks, “Why are you so nervous?” They’re swaddled in winter coats at the base of Will’s tree, their breath fogging in front of them. It’s the coldest day of Fall so far.

He considers lying to her. Something about his relationship to Dr. Lecter, new as it is, feels explicitly private. Will doesn’t have many friends, or possessions, but this meeting with Dr. Lecter is something that belongs totally to him. He wants to lie, which is something he almost never feels the inclination to do.

But Gio is sweet and straightforward and Will likes her a lot. He looks at the perimeter of her face and when he speaks, his voice comes out reserved, almost shy. “Dr. Lecter invited me to dinner,” he says. “So he's buying me a suit tomorrow.”

Gio gasps and grabs his coat sleeve. “How exciting!” she says. Will cuts his gaze away. He thinks it’s the harsh wind that’s making him blush. “I’m, ah, lesbian,” she says, her tone light. “Just so you know.”

Will tilts his head and smiles, confused, curious. “That’s… nice,” he says. He isn’t sure why she’s chosen this moment to tell him this.

She shrugs. “Just so you know,” she repeats, looking out at the grounds in front of them. Then, she looks back at him and grins. “So,” she says, “tell me everything.”

Will’s able to tell her the name of the tailor and the name of the restaurant, which Dr. Lecter mentioned only once in passing. It’s not much but still, Gio seems satisfied. She tells him it’s very upscale.

“How do you call it?” she asks. “Old-place?”

Will chuckles. “Old-world?” he proposes.

She snaps her fingers. “Old-world!” She nods sagely. “It’s very old-world. Very classy.” She gives him a droll look. “You’re a lucky boy, Will Graham.”

Will has the urge to cover his face with his hands. Instead, he knocks her with his shoulder, the gesture feeling all at once novel and familiar. She pushes back, then leans against him. She drops her head on his shoulder.

“People don’t know you,” she says. “If they knew you, they would like you.”

Will doesn’t believe her, but it’s nice to hear.

Despite Gio’s good intentions, the conversation under the tree only serves to increase Will’s nerves. Not only is the restaurant ‘old-world’, Gio went on to tell him that the tailor is elusive and difficult to get a hold of, making him the most sought after tailor in this part of the country. Will wakes up the next morning, sweating, from a nightmare where he grew long, coarse hairs from his arms and palms and had to pull them out, one by one. He forces himself to slow his breathing, and sits up in bed.

He checks the digital clock on the nightstand. *6:23 AM.* He still has a few hours before Dr. Lecter will be there to pick him up for the appointment. He considers this, thinking about the several papers he could work on in the spare time. He sighs and lays back on his bed. The nightmare fades and the banal reality of high school sets in on him. The time between visits with Dr. Lecter, with the exception of Gio, seems to drag on for years. Though Will thought it was impossible, high school has become even more trivial.

Finally, the concoction of nerves and restlessness, in addition to Will’s discomfort after waking up so drenched in sweat, pushes him out of bed. He gets up arduously and makes his way to the bathroom. His muscles feel sore and used, indicating he was tensed up in his sleep. The hot water of the shower helps. He avoids his own face in the mirror as he brushes his teeth, and forgets to shave. Once he’s dressed in the uniform combination of his choice, dark grey slacks and a white button up, he remembers, and considers stripping his shirt off and shaving anyway, but decides against it. He touches his face self consciously. He *likes* his

scruff, really. It's the only thing keeping him from looking perpetually 13. He gets the peculiar sense, however, that *Dr. Lecter* doesn't enjoy it. *Whatever,* Will thinks, shrugging on his suit jacket. *If there's a time to shape my appearance to Dr. Lecter's whims,* now *is not it.*

He makes the trek from the boys' dorms to the girls' in record time, letting the cold air cool him off. He does feel a little better by the time he makes it up to Gio's room, though not much. He knocks on the door.

Gio's roommate, a waifish senior with massive eyes named Tina, opens the door. She stares into Will's eyes and he skirts her gaze carefully, feeling uncomfortable. He asks if Gio's there in Italian.

"She's out," Tina says sharply.

Will opens his mouth to ask Tina where Gio's gone but before he can speak, she slams the door in his face. He hears her voice from inside her room: *strambo*; *disadatto*; the word she knows for it in English, *freak*. Will's hands ball into fists and he resists the childish urge to kick the door. He rushes out of the dormitory, taking the steps two at a time.

Will feels petty and adolescent for how hurt he is. He feels as though he should be past this, this desire for people to like him. After a need is un-met for so long, shouldn't it go away? He kicks around outside the girls' dorm for a little while before sulking back to his spot under the tree. He sits down heavily and looks up at the sky through the shedding branches. After a while, his breathing slows to a normal pace and his face no longer feels hot. He continues looking up at the sky, wishing he were an artist who could recreate the stark, black branches printed over pale gray.

"What are you thinking about?" Dr. Lecter asks him. Will's head snaps down and he takes in his presence. Dr. Lecter's dressed in a classic suit; crisp white shirt and black waistcoat and jacket, with a black tie knotted at his throat. He looks as he always does: handsome. Put together. Grown up. Will smiles up at him.

"How I wish I could paint," he says. "Or draw."

"Art is a fantastic way to express oneself." Will lets himself be distracted by Dr. Lecter's eyes, just for a moment. "What do you have to express, Will?" he asks.

"Something deep," Will deadpans, "and meaningful."

Dr. Lecter's eyes crinkle at the corners, smiling a not-quite-smile. He holds a hand out to Will. "Shall we?"

Will looks at the hand dubiously, entertaining a bizarre notion to *bite* it. As he reaches out to grab it, he feels against his own the minute calluses and contours. "You're an artist," he says, realizing it without knowing why he knows.

Dr. Lecter gives him an unreadable look and lets go of his hand. "I am," he says. "I appreciate the art of others through recreation." Dr. Lecter leads Will through campus to the staff parking lot near the front office.

“Some people would consider that theft,” Will says without thinking. It occurs to him that he’s being rude. He almost never registers rudeness, so it must be really egregious. He looks at Dr. Lecter hesitantly. Dr. Lecter opens the door for him.

“I am afraid that I am unconcerned with the ethics of beauty.”

Will slides into the passenger seat and a moment later, Dr. Lecter’s in the driver’s seat beside him. “Only the aesthetics,” Will says.

Dr. Lecter shifts into drive and the engine purrs resolutely. “That is the day’s pursuit, is it not?”

As they pull out of the school, Will’s anxiety returns to him and he finds himself dreading what Dr. Lecter has planned. “I guess so,” Will says, the apprehension clear in his voice. Dr. Lecter seems to pay no mind. Will sinks into a deep and silent unease over the course of the drive to the haberdashery, though he never once wishes to return to St. Gabriel.

They pull up to a surprisingly modest building, red bricked and tucked between a butcher shop and a florist’s. The entrance is unmarked except for the address, but Dr. Lecter shows no hesitation as he opens the door for Will.

Inside is closer to what Will had imagined, having never been to see a tailor before. There are large, floor to ceiling mirrors covering one wall, with a few raised platforms in front of them, surrounded by cushy antique chairs and chaise longues. The far wall is covered in deep red, velvety curtains, which look thick and heavy and soft to the touch. Then, to Will’s right, is a massive rectangular desk made of some glossy, dark wood. Stacks of paper and bolts of fabric in all shapes and colors lay across it, in the kind of organized disorganized chaos that Will feels oddly comforted by. Will glances back to the mirror, taking in the mismatched reflection of himself and Dr. Lecter next to each other. *What a pair* , Will thinks, inspecting his scrappy, skinny, feminine-faced self and Dr. Lecter’s sophisticated image. Will wonders if they’re not equally strange, the two of them.

A small, severe looking man, presumably the tailor, appears from behind the velvet curtains, muttering in Italian.

“*Sette pollici dalla cima*,” he says under his breath. “*Altri due… l'orlo. Per… signora Esposito… Sette* …” He bustles around the desk, shifting the fabric from one end to the other and shuffling through paper. “*Ciao*,” he says quietly, without looking at them.

Will holds an awkward hand up in an approximation of a wave. “*Ciao.*”

Dr. Lecter says nothing, instead approaching the man with his long-legged strides, holding his arms open. The two men embrace and the tailor kisses both of Dr. Lecter’s cheeks. Dr. Lecter says something in muttered Italian, then turns to smile at Will, beckoning him over. “Will,” Dr. Lecter says in his smooth tone, “this is my very good friend, Dante.”

“Your very *old* friend,” Dante murmurs in English. Dr. Lecter chuckles. Then, he and Dante both look at Will with a wide, probing gaze. “Something, blue, perhaps,” Dr. Lecter says. “To match the eyes.”

“Deep blue,” Dante says, pulling out a tiny notebook from one of his many pockets and making a note with a grease pencil.

Oh God, Will thinks, unbidden*, will I have to undress?*

Dr. Lecter, if he notices Will’s panic, makes no mention of it. With a touch on his elbow he leads Will deeper into the room, as though passing him off to Dante.

“Behind the curtain,” Dante says, gesturing over his shoulder, “your, ah, *biancheria intima* .”

Will shoots Dr. Lecter an alarmed look, but Dr. Lecter makes no move to intervene.

When Will reappears from the curtain in boxers and an undershirt, Dr. Lecter is sitting in one of the chairs, with one leg propped up, ankle resting on his knee. He doesn’t look at Will below the shoulders, though Will still feels as though he’s under scrutiny. He steps up to one of the platforms and avoids his own eye in the mirror as Dante begins to take his measurements. Dante manipulates his limbs like a doll, lifting his arm to measure from his armpit to his wrist, wrapping the tape around his waist, and so on. Will focuses on ignoring his own discomfort. He begins to wonder if this is all truly worth it, and glances at Dr. Lecter’s reflection in the mirror.

Dr. Lecter, for the first time, gives him an earnest, apologetic smile, with none of the charming veneer he usually wears. Will feels as though he’s soaking up the sun, and suppresses his own smile, feeling mollified.

The measuring takes a long time. Finally, after what feels like hours, Dante brings out the first suit. It’s deep blue, like Dr. Lecter had suggested. Dante brings out a shirt to go with it, another blue, this one so pale it’s almost silver. Will has to, in a process he finds bizarre and time-wasting, go back behind the curtain again to put the suit on, then return. He does this. The hems of the pants drag on the ground.

Dante kneels and pins the hem up, then moves up the leg, reshaping the silhouette as he goes. The shirt Dante barely alters, though he does bring it in slightly around the torso, pressing the silky material against Will’s skin. Then, before they can move onto the jacket, Dr. Lecter interrupts.

“Perhaps a waistcoat?” he says without moving from his position. Will watches his reflection. “I do believe we agreed upon a three piece over the phone.”

Dante, as he drapes the suit jacket over a chaise, tells him, “I was hoping to change your mind.” Then, as he’s leaving, presumably to fetch a waistcoat, he says, “The boy has such wonderful shoulders.”

Will looks back at his own reflection in time to see himself blush.

Dante returns with the waistcoat and Will shrugs it on. It slims him, he notices.

Soon after that, the suits begin to pass in a blur of sensation: the thick, clean smell of the fabrics, the press of it against him, a pinwheel of sapphires and navys. Each suit is pinned to

fit him exactly, making them, temporarily, only for him. A few simpler black and white ensembles pass through, with ties that Will loosens once Dante's not looking, and one pin-striped fiasco. Will scowls and hopes his disapproval is clearly perceived.

Dr. Lecter acknowledges each suit with either a nod of approval or a frown, and Dante sorts them into various piles over the furniture accordingly. Over time, Dr. Lecter concedes to the proposed absence of waistcoats and Dante begins to select pieces that, even Will can discern, accentuate his broad shoulders. Dr. Lecter endorses these, smiling a small, private smile at each one.

Though Will should feel turned off by this obvious display of power, he instead feels grateful to have pressure of any kind removed, to be allowed to stand around silently while someone else takes care of everything, to not have the expectation even of decision making. Will feels content, and disquieted by his own contentment.

Dante brings out a grey suit, the style of which resembles Will's school uniform. The moment he hands it to Will, Will cringes. The material is stiff, starchy, *disgusting*. Everything in Will's body pulls away from the offending cloth. Not wanting to cause a scene, Will grits his teeth and takes the suit.

He crosses the room quickly, gripping the suit firmly in his hands and breathing harshly through his nose. Behind the curtain is a small dressing room with no mirrors and Will releases the suit onto the tiny ottoman in the corner. He stares at it, weighing his options. He's already *in* the dressing room and it'd be humiliating to walk back out, *naked* , suit in hand, admitting failure. Will shakes his head and steels himself. He pulls on the trousers.

It's too much.

Will's skull presses in on his brain like a trash compactor. His extremities begin to tingle and numb as anger and fear bubble up in his throat, too much all at once. Suddenly, he's on his knees, covering his ears with his hands, trying to fight off the roaring sound of blood rushing. He realizes he's biting the inside of his cheek, and it's bleeding. There's no floor beneath him, no velvety curtains around him, just his own splitting head.

Will squeezes his eyes shut and lets the room melt away. He pries his hands away from his head and feels his own pulse on his wrist, concentrating on slowing it down, drawing his focus away from the feeling against his legs. *Your name is Will Graham*, he tells himself, thinking back to the grounding techniques he learned in therapy.

Dr. Lecter's big, warm hand is on the back of his neck, holding him in place. "Are you alright, Will?"

Will fixates in on the soothing sound of his voice and opens his eyes. Dr. Lecter is kneeling beside him and Will presses his hand against Dr. Lecter's chest.

Dr. Lecter takes this as a cue to back off, standing up and pressing against the curtain. Will strips off the trousers furiously, barely able to support himself on shaky legs. Will takes a yawning breath and lets it out in a gasp as soon as they're off, his skin no longer feeling as

though it's on fire. Dr. Lecter steps forward quickly, catching Will and keeping him upright, holding his forearms and ducking his head to speak softly to him.

"Your name is Will Graham," he says. "You are in Montaione, Tuscany. It is 10:15 in the morning." His touch is firm and steady. Will continues breathing deeply, in and out. Dr. Lecter turns his head and calls out in a clear, but not loud, voice, "Dante, collect Mr. Graham's clothes, please." Will doesn't understand when it happens, but his own clothes, mercifully soft and familiar, are in his hands. "Do you require assistance?" Dr. Lecter asks him. Will shakes his head and Dr. Lecter is gone, back on the other side of the curtain.

Will dresses slowly, in an effort to be gentle with himself.

He almost doesn't leave the dressing room, feeling sick to his stomach at the idea of having to face Dr. Lecter and Dante, who he just met, after a display like that. But he can't hide himself, or the reality of his autism, away forever. He decided a long time ago he wouldn't be embarrassed by his disability. Will juts his chin out defiantly and whips the curtain open. He steps out of the dressing room.

Outside, Dante is nowhere to be seen, and Dr. Lecter stands nearby, holding both his own and Will's jackets on his arm. He gives Will a straightforward, appraising look.

"Would you like me to take you home?"

In his state, for a moment, Will doesn't understand the question. Then, he realizes Dr. Lecter is referring to St. Gabriel when he says 'home'. Will shakes his head again.

"Very well," Dr. Lecter says, his voice something both reserved and tender.

Will tips his head back against the headrest once they're in the car and closes his eyes. Dr. Lecter drives for a long time, taking winding roads. Will plays a calming game with himself, keeping track of each direction they go, trying to build the streets around them in his mind based on the sounds of the city, which dim as time goes on. Will loses track though, loses himself in the rhythm of the winding drive, finally feeling like his head is rightly on his body again.

Will opens his eyes when the car pulls to a stop. Dr. Lecter gets out first and opens the door for him.

Will looks around. Dr. Lecter has taken him to a forest. Oaks and Maples surround them, orange and golden. The Autumn afternoon sun pours in, dappling the ground with spots of light. It smells like earth and clear air. Gentle breeze rustles the leaves. There's no sound of cars or people, nothing touching Will's body but his own clothes. Will sits heavily on the ground, dirtying the seat of his pants but not caring. Dr. Lecter, despite the fact that he *must* care, joins him.

After a beat of silence, Dr. Lecter speaks. "I owe you an apology," he says.

Will looks at him inquisitively.

“I sprung on you a high-sensory-input environment for my own pleasure, with no regard for your emotional well being. You must be hurt.”

Will shifts slightly to be closer to Dr. Lecter.

“It will not happen again.”

Will waits for righteous anger to strike him down there in the Tuscan countryside. He waits to hate Dr. Lecter, but nothing comes to him. It’d be easier to be angry, to never speak to Dr. Lecter again, to forget all about the possibility of dinner together, of a friendship. *Comfort zone*, Will hears in his head. He gets a chill over his body. He doesn’t want to return to New York, nor his dorm at St. Gabriel. He wants to stay here, by Dr. Lecter’s side, despite the discomfort.

“Do you forgive me, Will?”

Will’s voice hasn’t returned to him, so he nods his head in silent accord.

“Forgiveness is a tricky thing,” Dr. Lecter says. “Immateriel. Elusive.” He looks at Will and Will looks back, directly in the eye. “I understand if you no longer wish to accompany me to dinner.” Somewhere nearby, a bird begins to sing.

Will hears what Dr. Lecter’s really asking. Will makes a gesture with his hand and Dr. Lecter, understanding him, pulls out a sketchbook and a stick of graphite. Will takes them and writes out his message. *I still trust you…* Will’s hand hovers over the page, unsure what the second half of the message is. *To lead me outside my comfort zone? To buy me dinner? To take care of me?* Will shakes his head, and hands the book to Dr. Lecter as is. Dr. Lecter smiles.

“I should hope you do not stretch yourself beyond your limits.”

Will takes the sketchbook back and writes out, hesitantly, *I want to go to dinner* .

Dr. Lecter’s smile broadens, showing all his teeth. “In that case, of course you are welcome to join me.” His expression turns humorous. “Though, were you my patient, I would advise against it.”

Chapter End Notes

Posso aiutate: Can I help you?
Disadatto: Misfit
Biancheria intima: Underwear

CHAPTER III

Chapter Notes

1. Major warning in this chapter for use of the r-word in a derogatory manner and
2. I'm so sorry for the slow update. I'm doing school and work now and it's way too much. Damn the IB program!! Anyways I'm reducing my hours at work so hopefully updates will be more frequent now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will sits next to Gio in a semi-circle of her friends, arranged around the large, ornate fireplace set into the wall in the common area. They've been cuddled up together in plush couches and armchairs, seated two to a chair, since dinner. The shadows are long against the wall as the firelight flickers across each of their faces, making the moment glow golden and warm. Will lets the lilting tones of murmured Italian wash over him. Gio lays her cheek against Will's chest and he settles an arm around her shoulders hesitantly, affected by how good it all feels.

Will watches as a girl in the circle, Valeria, catches Gio's eye and makes a complicated expression with her eyebrows. Will can't see Gio's face, but doubts he could gauge the meaning of the exchange even if he could. The interaction does nothing to dampen Will's mood, and he doubts anything could.

"And you?" One of Gio's friends nods to him. Will looks up, unsure what the guy is referencing. She smiles at Will indulgently and elaborates: "Do you have a girl?" He nods at Gio, smirking. "Back home."

Will looks down to see, from a strange angle, Gio stick her tongue out at the boy. Will chuckles. He looks up.

"No," he says. *Definitely not*, he thinks.

The guy tilts his head, as though he expects Will to elaborate, but Will doesn't see the need. It's pretty simple. He doesn't like anybody and nobody likes him.

"Will Graham," a voice behind Will's chair says. Gio lifts her head and Will turns around. It's another senior, one who works in the office more than she actually appears in class, dressed in pajamas. Will realizes for the first time how late it must be. She tells him in beleaguered Italian that there's a call for him, and to just let himself into the office.

Since arriving in Italy, his father has yet to call or write. Will dreads what news could be bad enough to necessitate a long distance phone call, at this hour, as he disentangles from Gio and leaves the common area. The walk to the office is short but taxing, the wind whipping Will's hair and biting his face, his thoughts racing.

The door to the office is unlocked. Inside, it's strangely empty and not much warmer than the outdoors, though the lights are on. A sticky note reads in English: *On hold. Turn lights out when finish.* Will shivers. He looks at the half-booth in the corner of the room with a large, shiny, cream-colored phone hanging on the wall then crosses the room, picks up the phone, and resumes the call.

"What is it?" he asks bluntly, prepared for the worst.

"Your suit has arrived." Dr. Lecter's voice comes through clearly and slightly amused.

"Oh," Will says, feeling relieved and excited at once. The feeling comes out as a strangled laugh. "Hi," he says, his voice coming out gentler than he means it to. It sounds unfamiliar to him. "Hello," he tries again, though it sounds even worse.

"Hello, Will." Dr. Lecter's voice is slightly gravelly over the phone, Will notes.

"My suit is ready?" Will asks, completing the strange repeating pattern of their conversation.

"Conventionally, there would be an additional fitting," Dr. Lecter says. "But I have made special arrangements."

Will shifts his to hunch slightly over the phone, covering it with his body, despite the fact that there's no one else in the room. He feels as though this conversation is irrationally private. He wants to keep it all to himself. "Oh?"

"Dante repaid me a debt."

Will tips his head against the phonebox. "Do many people find themselves indebted to you, Dr. Lecter?"

Dr. Lecter chuckles. "I am afraid so. Some, even, without their own knowledge."

"How are they going to pay you back?" Will asks.

"I am sure they will find a way."

Will closes his eyes and sees Dr. Lecter's face in perfect detail. He imagines the quirk of Dr. Lecter's mouth when he finds something particularly engaging. "Do you ever leave a loose end untied?" Will asks.

When Dr. Lecter speaks, Will can see his tongue touching the roof of his mouth. "Never," he says.

Will wonders, suddenly, if there's something wrong with Dr. Lecter. If he should be afraid. He thinks back to the way they looked next to each other in Dante's mirror; Dr. Lecter so beautiful, yet just as unusual as Will. Instead of voicing his concern, Will scuffs the toe of the shoe against the wall of the half-booth. "There's a lot you don't tell me," he says.

"What would you like to know?"

Will considers this. Given the opportunity to ask Dr. Lecter anything, presuming he won't lie, what *would* Will like to know? The possibilities overwhelm him. *Where are you from? What happened to your family? What do you do when we're not together?* Instead, without really meaning to, selfishly, Will asks, "Why me?"

There's a silence on the other end of the line, long enough to allow Will to cringe. *Could I sound any needier?* he wonders bitterly.

Finally, Dr. Lecter says, "You are an extraordinary boy, Will."

"I like you," Will says honestly, though it's difficult for him to admit. He wants to *match* Dr. Lecter. "I find you… *interesting*."

Dr. Lecter answers, "Then our feelings are mutual, and we are bearing witness to a rare and magnificent occurrence."

"An eclipse," Will says.

"It is apt to compare our friendship to a heavenly phenomenon. Though I lament the brevity of an eclipse."

"And yet," Will teases, "you still agree with me."

"Yes. Still."

Will smiles into the phone, feeling triumphant to his core, downright *smug* . "So… the suit," Will says, stilted, ruining the moment.

Dr. Lecter doesn't acknowledge Will's fumble and answers smoothly. "I am looking at it as we speak," he says. "Would you like to try it on after all?"

Will opens his mouth but no sound comes out. He swallows thickly and tries again. "Yes." His voice is hoarse. Will clears his throat. "No," he says, aiming for firm and missing totally. "Sorry. I have…" he trails off. "Homework," he finishes lamely. It's not that he's truly a bad liar, it's more like part of him would like for Dr. Lecter to call attention to his dishonesty, for Dr. Lecter to insist Will does what he *really wants* .

Instead, Dr. Lecter is eerily unresponsive for a moment, remaining completely silent, the only sound coming through the line being his even breathing. When he does speak, his voice is void of all feeling, and sends a chill down Will's spine. "Very well," he says. "I will send the suit to St. Gabriel in the morning." Before Will can answer, Dr. Lecter says, "Good night, Will," some of the smoothness returning to his voice, though Will can discern easily that he's guarding something.

Will doesn't know what to say. He keeps the phone to his ear even as the dial tone plays loud and obnoxious. The idea of returning to his dorm, walking alone through the cold with only his thoughts to accompany him, intimidates him. He steels himself and turns out the lights.

As he walks back to his dorm, he considers the conversation with Dr. Lecter.

Will Graham is not an idiot, and recognizes what happened for what it was. Dr. Lecter is looking to train him, rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior. Will wrestles with this idea. He doesn't think Dr. Lecter sees him as a pet, any more than Gio does, but how can that be true if Dr. Lecter's looking to *train* him? What kind of cognitive dissonance must he have to humanize Will and treat him this way at the same time?

And anyways , Will thinks, jogging up the stairs to his room, *what does he want from me? What could he manipulate out of me?*

Will shoulders the door open and his dorm is mercifully well heated, much more so than the empty stairwell. Will strips off his school uniform in the dark and changes quickly into sweatpants and his nicest sweatshirt, which is still somewhat threadbare. He frowns absently as he turns down the bed covers. Does this mean Dr. Lecter finds Will… malleable? Naive? Will crawls into bed, suddenly exhausted. His body feels heavy sinking into the soft mattress. *This is probably the nicest bed I've ever slept in* , Will thinks as he closes his eyes. *Maybe Dr. Lecter just…* Will turns his head and rubs his face against his pillow, enjoying the sensation. *Maybe he just didn't want to talk to me after I rejected him* , Will thinks blearily, already falling asleep.

Will wakes up the next morning to an incessant knocking on his door. Will knows before he gets out of bed who's on the other side of the door.

"Good morning, Gio," he says, opening the door.

She pushes past him with a large garment bag and sturdy wooden box, balanced precariously, in her arms. "No time for 'hello', Will!" she says. Will can't help it; her excitement bleeds into him and he smiles broadly. "You must try this on!" Will chuckles as Gio lays the bag out on his bed and sets the box on the ground. She begins unzipping the bag. Will peers over her shoulder eagerly, interested to see which of the many options made the final cut.

The white canvas material of the garment bag falls away to reveal a midnight blue suit, including the silky silver shirt Will had first tried on. Gio lets out a thrilled, high pitched sound and bats his arm. "*Sbalorditivo*," she says reverently.

She reaches out gingerly to touch. Will himself is fascinated by the material, which recasts as Gio makes contact, reminding Will of clouds passing over the night sky. The color isn't dark, necessarily, but *deep* . "You must try it on," Gio repeats herself. Will almost argues, filled with a sudden anxiety that the suit will crumble to pieces the moment he touches it. Still, he feels, in the pit of his stomach, a shameful desire to feel it against his skin, to see himself next to Dr. Lecter, to make one half of a strange, beautiful pair.

Set into the wall next to his closet is a full length mirror. Will steps out of the bathroom wearing the suit and crosses the room to look at himself. Close behind him, Gio covers her mouth and takes in a small gasp of air.

The suit fits him perfectly. It was *made* for him.

Will lifts an arm to watch the material fold and shift. He holds the sleeve against his face for the feel. He can't tell what kind of fabric it's made of but it's soft and smooth, the fibers so tiny they're imperceptible even to Will, as though the suit is made of nothing at all. Will looks at his figure in the mirror, his expectations dashed. He wasn't able to imagine the way the suit makes him seem taller, broader, more grown up. There's also something sweet and feminine about it, something that draws you into his eyes, his long lashes. Any voice in Will's head pointing out the expense is drowned out by the *awe*. He's reminded of what Dr. Lecter said on the phone the night before: a heavenly phenomenon.

"*Will*," Gio whispers. Will looks at her over his shoulder. "What will they say?"

Will tucks suit garment bag and shoe box into his closet carefully, long after Gio's gone. He has a full two days of classes before dinner with Dr. Lecter and very little idea as to how he's going to survive it. He has no doubt that rumors are already circulating, speculating on why a poor American exchange student would receive a package from a high end haberdashery. All throughout the first day, he finds anxiety seizing his chest each time he makes out a murmured conversation or registers an underclassman looking at him for a beat too long. By the time his classes are over for the day, Will's unable to separate reality from his paranoia. The whole thing gives him hives and he's on edge walking through the hallways, his hands balled in fists in his pockets.

When the grumpy senior from the night before stops him, he almost literally jumps. Instead, he takes a harsh step back and grimaces. She tells him in Italian that he's wanted at the administrative office, and Will's posture doesn't relax.

"I haven't done anything wrong," Will says. She gives him an unimpressed look.

Will is led through campus and eventually to the waiting area outside the headmaster's office. There are a few uncomfortable leather chairs arranged around a low coffee table, covered in pamphlets advertising the school. One such pamphlet boasts an 'inclusive, welcoming culture'. Will scoffs.

Just then, the door to the headmaster's office opens and the headmaster pokes his balding head out. "Signore Graham," the headmaster says, "please, come in."

Will enters the office and sits in a chair identical to those outside. He shifts and wipes his hands against his pants. The headmaster takes his seat in the high backed chair on the other side of the large desk between them and clears his throat. Will focuses his gaze on the headmaster's large right shoulder.

"How are you fitting in here, Signore Graham?" he asks gruffly.

"Fine."

The headmaster nods his head. "You're enjoying your classes?" he asks.

“Yes.”

“Getting along with the other students?”

“Yes,” Will grits out.

“I understand you have an extensive accommodation plan,” he says, as though he’s done Will a great favor.

“I do.”

“Your records show great academic success,” the headmaster says.

Will doesn’t understand what he’s getting at. He says nothing.

“Do you consider yourself to be an *intelligent* young man, Will?”

Will’s hands flex compulsively in his lap. “I guess so, sir.”

“You guess so,” the headmaster says, leaning back in his chair. “Let me tell you something. Hannibal Lecter has been a beneficiary of this school since he was 19 years old. He is, to put it modestly, *vital* to the ecosystem of this institution.” This does not surprise Will. “Why he has taken a specific interest in you, I do not know.” *That makes two of us,* Will does not say. “But I will not have six years of good faith torn down by a…” he struggles to find the word. “*Cynical*,” he settles on, “16-year-old who thinks he knows everything.”

“I’m seventeen,” Will says.

The headmaster bangs his imposing fist on his desk and Will startles, looking at his pale, white face but not his eyes. “I will not tolerate malfeasance!” Will wipes his hands against the fabric of his pants. “You will attend dinner with Hannibal Lecter and you will behave yourself!”

Will barely stops himself from laughing out loud. He imagines Dr. Lecter there too, telling him to behave himself. The juxtaposition is so bizarre, the current situation so tense, that he stifles a giggle. He does his best to nod solemnly.

The headmaster dismisses Will from his office shortly after, instructing him to attend the remainder of his classes as regularly scheduled.

Gio corners him the moment he’s out the door.

“Something’s wrong,” she says.

Will shrugs. “The headmaster doesn’t want me to fuck up dinner with Dr. Lecter.”

Gio frowns. “You could kick Lecter in the shins and he would thank you.”

Will laughs at the absurdity, unable to stop himself. The tension of the day finally, *finally*, melts away. Will looks at Gio and she’s smiling proudly. “Why the shins?” Will asks.

“That’s what you can reach,” Gio deadpans.

Will, Gio, and her pretty, half-British friend, Valeria, go out for lunch the next day, in a transparent attempt to keep Will’s spirits high. Valeria leads them to an unfortunately crowded café, where Will makes an effort to order as quickly as possible. Gio finds them seats in the corner and they set their bags down, draping their jackets over their chairs. Will sits down heavily, the noise already setting in on him. He hunches over himself. Sounds seem to ramp up and up, getting impossibly loud, hurting his ears.

“What’s wrong with him?” Valeria’s voice breaks through.

Gio puts a hand on his, using his hands to cover his ears. He’s grateful for the respite. “Sensory overload,” she says. “We should probably leave.”

Valeria sighs and agrees, obviously annoyed. Will can’t bring himself to care.

Gio leads them out of the café and onto the much quieter street. They sit together, the three of them, on the curb, Gio’s arm around Will. Will takes deep breaths and hears Dr. Lecter’s voice in his head. *Your name is Will Graham. You are in Montaione, Tuscany. It is 12:30 in the afternoon.* He focuses on the pleasant, physical weight of Gio’s arm over his shoulders, present and heavy. He’s beginning to feel calm when Valeria speaks.

“I think I hear them calling our order,” she says in her posh accent.

Gio frowns slightly. “I didn’t hear anything.”

Valeria insists, “I heard them. If you get our food we can eat out here so Will doesn’t get sense-overload, or whatever.” Will’s frowning, too. He can tell when people are lying, usually, but he’s not sure if it’s appropriate to point it out. It seems like Gio might know anyway. “Please,” Valeria continues, “I’m really hungry.”

Gio relents, though she shoots Valeria a suspicious glance over her shoulder.

Once Gio’s out of sight, Valeria sidles up to Will. She places a hand on his knee gently. “So,” she begins slyly, “you’re pretty cute for a retard.” Will must have an uncontrollable facial reaction because Valeria quickly backtracks. “Oh my god, I’m sorry, are you and Gio dating? For real?”

Just then, Gio returns with little cardboard boxes of bagels and to-go cups of coffee. Will looks up at her, probably still making a face, his mouth hanging open.

“What’s wrong?” she asks immediately.

Valeria’s hand does not move from Will’s knee. “Will and I,” she says, “were just talking about the hot date he has planned.” She winks at him.

“What?” he says dumbly. He feels like he must be dreaming, or have missed something vital to the conversation.

Valeria looks at him like he’s an idiot. “That’s what the suit’s for, right? We don’t very well have prom here, do we?”

“What’s going on?” Gio asks, her voice edging on desperate.

Will shakes his head. He doesn’t know what to tell her.

They don’t end up eating together. Will’s lost his appetite.

Instead, they ride back to St. Gabriel in silence, the girls’ boxed leftovers in their laps as Gio drives them in her tiny VW Beetle, Will’s mouth a thin line. Valeria’s voice keeps playing in his head, over and over again. It’s not even the word she said. That, he’s heard before. It’s the way she said it, like it was a compliment, and the compliment was the real joke. Will forces himself to relax his body. He thinks about all the times in the past when the truth has come crashing down on him like that, the realization that he was being made fun of. But this is Italy, and he thought it would be different. *That’s the crux of it, isn’t it?* Will thinks. *I thought things would be different.* He sighs without meaning to, and Gio risks a glance over at him. He does not meet her gaze.

Back at St. Gabriel, Gio and Will drop Valeria off at her dorm, Gio telling her she left something in Will’s dorm.

As they walk away, toward the boys’ dormitory, Gio tells Will, “She will think we’re sleeping together, but that’s actually better, because she won’t ask me questions.”

Will looks at the dying brush framing the path from the girls’ dorm to the boys’ dorm. “I thought girls talked to each other about that sort of thing.”

“What do you know about girls?” Gio teases.

Maybe Will would usually laugh, but this time he doesn’t.

They walk in silence for a while before Gio speaks up. “What did Valeria say to you?”

“Something cruel,” Will says.

“You can tell me.”

Will stops walking and Gio does too. They face each other and Will looks into her eyes briefly. Will finds the truth crawling out of his mouth and onto the ground between them without any input of his own. “She said I was cute for an autistic person,” he says, though the literal words don’t encapsulate *why* what she said was hurtful. Anyways, Gio gets the idea. She huffs a breath. Her expression turns stormy, something intense and wonderful that Will has never seen before. She’s *angry* . Truly angry.

“Would you like me to say something to her?” she asks, her voice calculated and even, enunciating each syllable, *seething* .

For the first time since the café, Will smiles. “No,” he says, breaking into a grin. “No, it’s fine.” He ducks his head down in an attempt to hide his dopey expression. “It’s fine now.”

Chapter End Notes

Sbalorditivo: Astounding.

CHAPTER IV

Chapter Notes

> I'm back baby! And yes, I'm writing this in an effort to avoid my *other* unfinished fanfiction.

Will's already waiting outside when Dr. Lecter pulls up in the Benz. He steps out of the car looking like an illustration of Lucifer, his cheekbones illuminated by the low sun, his suit the same red-black as his eyes, shimmering in the golden light. His shirt, tie, lapels, and the satin ribbon of fabric running up each leg are all matte black, stark against the gleaming suit. His skin is pale white and his features almost gaunt; he is hauntingly beautiful. Will, even in his own fine garments, feels as though he just doesn't compare.

Dr. Lecter stops him from approaching the car with a hand on his shoulder. "Just a moment," he mutters as though he doesn't realize he's speaking out loud. "Let me look at you."

Will skin feels prickly and hot. He waits, shifting his weight from one foot to the other as Dr. Lecter drinks in the sight of him.

"Breath-taking," Dr. Lecter says finally.

Will's face burns red and he wonders if he's always blushed this often. Dr. Lecter opens the passenger side door for him and he climbs into the car.

Will does not smile, but he does duck his head in an effort to hide whatever expression he's making. Dr. Lecter's hand moves to his elbow.

"I apologize," Dr. Lecter says, "We must make a stop before *Vivant*."

It takes Will a moment to comprehend what Dr. Lecter's saying and he shakes his head, trying to sort his thoughts. Dr. Lecter's touch is very distracting and his eyes are even worse. Will gazes up at him helplessly. Finally, all he manages is, "Okay."

Will watches Dr. Lecter's profile as they drive. He feels a mellow curiosity as to where they're going, a pleasant tickle in the base of his neck, a lingering thrill. He *trusts* Dr. Lecter, he realizes. *This can only end well*, Will thinks sardonically, tracing the bow of Dr. Lecter's mouth with his gaze. *I'm attached*, he decides, unable to bring himself to feel a lasting bitterness.

The drive is short and winding and the thrill persists throughout. Finally, they come to a stop at an empty park. The sun is setting over the rolling hills, and everything is golden and orange in the light.

Will gets out of the car himself, not giving Dr. Lecter the time to open the door for him. He stands up to better see the rows and rows of grapevines in the distance, the groves of olive trees, and the white spots roving the fields, which he knows to be sheep. He looks up at the filmy pink clouds passing over the violet sky. He twists around to see, opposite the sunset, the first specks of starlight peeking through dusk. Will thinks no photograph could ever capture this moment, though he still wishes he had a camera. When he looks back at Dr. Lecter, who's standing on his side of the car now, behind him, Dr. Lecter is already looking at him with an unreadable expression on his face. Perhaps *fond.*

"Why did you take me here?" Will asks, feeling more attached than ever.

"I thought…" For the first time since they've met, Dr. Lecter hesitates. "I would like to give you a gift," he says finally.

"More than this?"

Dr. Lecter's expression is, for just a moment, helpless. Then, he transforms again into the mask of composure he usually wears, looking just like himself. "One more thing," Dr. Lecter says softly. He retrieves a small, flat, black box from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. He takes a few steps towards and Will reaches out and takes the gift in his hand, equal parts eager and afraid to open it. He runs his hand over the velvety material of the box. He opens it.

Inside, a pair of silver cufflinks wink at him in the golden light.

Inscribed: *W.G.*

Will looks up at Dr. Lecter. "I can't accept this," he says anxiously, quickly shutting the box. Dr. Lecter does not acknowledge this.

"This is not the first gift I have given you." Dr. Lecter's tone is gentle, probing. "How is it different from the others?"

Will feels panicky just holding the cufflinks. They're stunning. They're *inscribed with his initials*. "They can never belong to anyone else," Will says.

Dr. Lecter leans in imperceptibly. "Nothing I give you should belong to anyone else."

This doesn't serve to make Will less nervous, but it's what he wants to hear.

Will wears the damn cufflinks to dinner, but it takes Dr. Lecter actually putting them on him; he can't do it himself. He's conscious of how much they glitter against his deep blue suit, drawing the eye. He has half a mind to hide behind Dr. Lecter's shoulder as they enter *Vivant*.

The restaurant is intimidating. It's on the third floor of the historic building it's housed in, overlooking the beautiful view of grassy knolls and low, bricked buildings surrounding it. It's

mostly empty of patrons, though a few older couples of wealthy looking men and women decorate the tables. The moment they're through the door, as Will's taking everything in, the host greets them. He welcomes them once in Italian and then again in English. Will would roll his eyes if he weren't so preoccupied by the way they must look to the host. *Expensive*.

Dr. Lecter thanks the host graciously as they take their seats. Their table is set into one of the large, beautiful windows, overlooking the expansive view. It's the view that does it. It sinks into Will. "How much will dinner cost tonight?" Will asks bluntly, feeling sweat bead at the base of his neck, no doubt staining the silky white collar of his shirt.

Dr. Lecter, reliably, dodges the question. "You have never asked before."

"Maybe I wasn't thinking."

"What are you thinking now?"

Will looks around the restaurant again, at the sparse tuxedos and evening gowns, the coiffed hair and glittery smiles. *What could I* possibly *have in common with these people?* Will asks himself. "That you cleared this place out just enough for me to be here," Will says, putting it together.

"Clever boy," Dr. Lecter says. "I considered hosting a dinner party but thought this may be more appropriate." Will finds himself intrigued. It must show on his face, because Dr. Lecter elaborates, "Should you like to attend a dinner party, Will, there is always a setting for you at my table."

Will picks up a fork and turns it over. Even he's able to recognize his place has been set as a mirror to Dr. Lecter's, accommodating for the fact that Will is left-handed. "I'm not used to being… *accommodated*," he says awkwardly, "without asking." There's a lengthy pause. "Thank you," Will says finally.

Dr. Lecter shakes his head minutely, though his expression is forgiving. "There is no need for 'thank you's. May I order for you tonight?"

Will hesitates.

"Do you trust me, Will?"

Will nods without saying anything, feeling afraid of what might come out of his mouth. As though listening to the conversation, the maître d' appears the moment Will acquiesces. He takes their drink and food orders all at once, and Will doesn't have to say a word. He feels that same misplaced gratitude. He tamps down the impulse to thank Dr. Lecter again, reminding himself of the words which just left Dr. Lecter's mouth: *No need for 'thank you's.* Will then thinks of his father calling Will, when he was perhaps six or seven years old, "an ungrateful little prat." Every so often, Will wishes his memory weren't the perfectly preserved catalog it is. Will wonders then what Dr. Lecter would have to say about Will's father's words. The thought invokes in him an urge to laugh, bitterly.

Dr. Lecter's watching him. Dr. Lecter is almost always watching him. Will risks a brief eye contact, then looks away. Dr. Lecter's eyes are fathomless and beautiful as ever; Will studies the table cloth intently. Dr. Lecter breaks the silence, "What is on your mind, Will?" Will can't help but relish the way Dr. Lecter says his name, the way Dr. Lecter's tongue lingers against the back of his teeth as he says it. Will blinks, focuses on answering Dr. Lecter's question.

"I'm thinking… my father wouldn't approve of our friendship."

Dr. Lecter nods. If the word 'friendship' elicits an internal emotional reaction in Dr. Lecter, he doesn't betray this. Instead, he says, "Your father seems an imposing figure in your life. I imagine this makes certain efforts towards independence arduous."

Will runs his hand over the thick tablecloth. The material is soft to the touch. "He wishes I were different than I am. I can't blame him for that."

There's a beat of silence. The quiet murmur of ambient conversation around them seems to grow louder for a moment and Will has the realization that he can barely understand the Italian being spoken. He's not sure if it's due to his actual comprehension of the language or his disordered auditory processing. He looks up at Dr. Lecter, who seems focused only on him. "Can you forgive him?" Dr. Lecter asks.

Will turns his head. The maître d' is approaching with a platter of food. It smells incredible, even from this distance. It manages to be enveloping without overwhelming, and for that Will is grateful. He feels in his stomach a curiosity as to what Dr. Lecter ordered for him, though there's a great deal of trepidation as well. Will fears another meltdown. He thinks, reasonably so.

Dr. Lecter expresses no disappointment at Will's lack of answer. Will wishes, not for the first time, that he could *read* Dr. Lecter the way he can read others. Dr. Lecter stops looking at Will for a moment, and looks at the maître d' instead, thanking him sincerely. Will looks down at his plate, nervous that the food will be something strange or overtly complicated.

It looks… *raw*. As in, *uncooked meat*.

Will is half-tempted to pick up his fork and begin poking it, as though encouraging it to get up and crawl off the plate. Instead, he asks Dr. Lecter, "What is this?" He tries to force his tone into something soft, kind, even. He's not sure if he succeeds in this effort.

"Wagyu Tartare," Dr. Lecter answers. "A raw-beef-dish with light herb-seasoning."

Will looks suspiciously at his plate. He's eaten raw fish before, in sushi, but never raw beef. He doesn't know what 'tartare' is. "And what do you have?" Will asks, not looking up from his plate.

"Lamb," Dr. Lecter says, and nothing else.

Will separates away a small piece of the Wagyu Tartare away with his fork. He's not sure what constitutes an appropriate bite-size but guesses, based on how small the serving itself is,

the smaller the better. He takes the bite, albeit hesitantly.

It's incredible.

Better than the tomato soup from lunch with Dr. Lecter, which Will, up until this very moment, didn't think was possible. He chews thoroughly, not wanting to swallow. The flavor coats his tongue, gentle and delicious, strong without overwhelming him. Incredible. Will swallows.

"Oh my god," Will says, wondering how often Dr. Lecter will feed him incredible food, seemingly just to watch him enjoy it.

Will opens his eyes, not having realized he closed them. He looks at Dr. Lecter, who gives him a shark-like smile, and takes his own bite. He chews, swallows, never once taking his eyes off Will. Will, with his right hand, squeezes his thumb in his hand as an alternative to self-stimulating by flapping his hands. He feels the urge to make loud noises, but bites his tongue. Will takes another bite of the Wagyu Tartare and notices this time the texture, soft and almost melting in his mouth. As he continues to eat, Dr. Lecter, never once looking away from him, begins to speak.

"When I was your age, I was told by those around me that I was exceptionally bright for someone with my history." Will wonders what he means, as afraid he is to ever learn. "Though," Dr. Lecter continues, "I was nothing like you, Will." Will feels himself blush and takes another bite of his dish so as to hide his smile. "Your ability to interpret the inner-world of others is, I will admit, difficult to swallow. I find myself jealous of the way you see the world. How I wish I could try on your mind." No one has ever, ever treated Will's constraints as something to be envied; a gift. Dr. Lecter goes on as Will takes another bite, feeling warm all over, "What a privilege to dissect others with only a look. And yet, also, a curse. I do not wish you to think I do not hold a great deal of sympathy for you and your condition. I understand it has made it difficult for you to connect meaningfully with young people your own age," Dr. Lecter says.

Will, feeling affected by the rich food, takes a cessation in eating and looks to the glass of wine on the left side of his plate. It's a deep red color, evocative of Dr. Lecter's eyes. Will takes a generous sip, expecting the bitter aftertaste of alcohol to overwhelm him but desperately thirsty for it anyways, needing a reprieve from Dr. Lecter's words. Instead of bitterness, a deep and complex sweetness floods Will's mouth. He swallows and feels the cool liquid run down the column of his throat. Dr. Lecter, perhaps mirroring him, takes a smaller sip from his own wine glass. Will watches Dr. Lecter's Adam's apple bob softly and thinks of the desire he felt before, when Dr. Lecter reached a hand out to him; the desire to *bite*.

An hour or so later, Will feels drunk on red and food and Dr. Lecter's attention. Dr. Lecter has, coincidentally, cut him off. Or, more accurately, simply stopped ordering wine for the both of them. Will takes account of this passively, careful to feel unbothered by it. It's okay anyways; Dr. Lecter's attention is more than enough to keep Will in a sedated state. Will feels

as though his eyelids are heavy. He's reminded of once, in sophomore year, when a group of seniors offered him marijuana. His bones felt liquid and his gaze felt especially unwieldy. He feels this way now, as though he can't look away from Dr. Lecter, can't bring himself to stop staring, heavy-lidded.

He does wonder, absently, why Dr. Lecter has stopped the generous flow of alcohol. He guesses it has to do with Will's affinity for it.

Will looks around, his head feeling heavy as well. He realizes the crowd has changed, and new faces surround them. He catches the eye of a glitzy couple watching Will and Dr. Lecter intently, and they both quickly look away. Will looks at them, still. Wonders how he and Dr. Lecter must look to the outside world. *Expensive,* he thinks for a second time.

"May I ask what has caught your eye?" Dr. Lecter asks him.

"A couple," Will tells him honestly, "was staring at us, is all." When Will finally looks back at Dr. Lecter, his expression is once again unreadable. It's clouded, dark, almost frightening. "What is it?" Will asks.

Dr. Lecter blinks and the expression is gone and he looks as admiring and charming as he always does. "Staring is an impolite practice," Dr. Lecter says, moving on swiftly. "Shall we begin our departure?"

Will registers this change in subject sleepily, and without much successive cognition. He blinks slowly at Dr. Lecter and feels his face break into a grin. "I think we should," Will says. "But I don't want to."

Dr. Lecter smiles in return. "I must say that I empathize." Will notes how sharp Dr. Lecter's canines are.

It's nighttime outside the restaurant. The cold air whips Will's hair and he wishes it were as expertly styled as Dr. Lecter's. Will pauses in their walk to the car and tips his head back to look at the night sky. It's full of stars. Beautiful.

Dr. Lecter stopped to speak to the couple that was staring at them before they left, taking a little scrap of paper— perhaps a business card, from the man. Will frowns at the sky, not understanding the reason for this gesture.

"Will," Dr. Lecter says, standing a little ways ahead of him, beckoning him forward. Will jogs to catch up, stumbling slightly. Dr. Lecter catches him firmly by the arm. Will forgets everything about the business card at Dr. Lecter's warm touch. He raises his nearly-translucent eyebrows. "Careful," he says firmly, in his incredible lilting accent. Will just smiles at him broadly.

Will once again watches Dr. Lecter's profile as he drives them to St. Gabriel. He feels heady and loose-limbed. "I recognize the unethical nature of someone your age buying me alcohol," Will says, rubbing his hands on the thighs of his pants and enjoying the sensation, "but I sure like how it makes me feel."

Dr. Lecter, without taking his eyes off the road, makes an ironically quizzical expression. "'Someone of my age'?" Dr. Lecter repeats.

The sound of Will's own laugh startles him. It's loud and youthful, and the kind of sound he's unused to.

"I appreciate your honesty," Dr. Lecter says sincerely. "Are you aware you revert to a Southern accent when intoxicated?"

Will frowns. "I shed my accent when I was 14 years old. I grew out of it," he says adamantly.

"There is very little we truly grow out of, in my opinion. And very much we carry with us." The way Dr. Lecter says it sounds a little forlorn around the edges.

Will's frown deepens. He doesn't want Dr. Lecter to be upset. He reaches a hand out and touches Dr. Lecter's arm gently, just below his elbow. The material of Dr. Lecter's suit is stiffer and rougher than Will's. Will's hand lingers and Dr. Lecter's grip tightens on the wheel. Softly, Will says, "I don't have an accent."

It surprises Dr. Lecter. He barks a loud laugh. The sound makes Will grin so wide it hurts his face.

"I am rather fond of it," Dr. Lecter says after he takes a breath.

Will feels his face heat again and lolls his head to the side to watch the countryside pass by out the window, the rickety street lamps lighting the way, it all passing in a blur. "You've made a habit of flattering me," Will says to his reflection in the window.

"You display behavior worthy of flattery."

There's that word again. *Behavior*.

Will turns his head to look at Hannibal once again. "Did I behave well tonight, Dr. Lecter?" Will squeezes his hand into a fist in his lap for a reason he can't discern. His nails bite into his sweaty palm. He takes a deep breath in and watches a series of complicated micro-expressions pass over Dr. Lecter's face, all in profile. Finally, Dr. Lecter's face returns to a carefully constructed blank slate. Will watch curiously.

With very little emotion, Dr. Lecter says, "We've arrived."

Will feels warm all over. *Likely due to the wine,* he thinks to himself. *Possibly due to Dr. Lecter.* Will feels a strong urge to lean forward and *hug* Dr. Lecter but, even in his inebriated state, resists. Instead of falling like a damsel into Dr. Lecter's strong arms, Will waits patiently as Dr. Lecter exits the car and makes his way around to open Will's door. Will takes pride in remembering this special ritual on the first try, though it feels as though it takes an age for Dr. Lecter to get to Will's door.

Finally, Dr. Lecter opens the door for him and Will steps out of the car into the cool night air.

"May I walk you to your dormitory?" Dr. Lecter asks, tipping his head forward slightly to speak softly to Will. Will tilts his own head back, looking up at Dr. Lecter. Will feels suddenly aware of his height. He's always been short for his age and this is not the first time he's noticed, but it occurs to him that it's been a long time since he's stood this close to a much taller man. The last time was likely when his father and he exchanged a stiff hug outside the airport in New York before Will left for Italy. Will himself is 5'6" and still growing, while Dr. Lecter is at least six feet tall. Will feels the ridiculous impulse to stand on his tiptoes.

He refocuses on Dr. Lecter's question. It reminds him of the way noir gentlemen talk to dames in old movies. "Yes," Will answers easily, feeling as though it's not even a question. *Of course,* he means. *Of course, of course. Come with me, come with me, come with me.*

Will's wandered the St. Gabriel campus at night many times since arriving in the Italian countryside. Many nights early in the semester he found himself unable to sleep, and stalked the grounds like some kind of creature of the night, lurking near the trees and away from the windows, afraid of scaring someone more than being caught.

Walking with Dr. Lecter feels different. Will never imagined being with others could be so different from being alone but now, with Gio and Dr. Lecter in his life, Will finds himself surrounded by… something like love. Something very much like love.

The stars twinkle above them, lack of light pollution making them shine brighter than they ever did in New York, even outside the city, where they didn't shine at all. Will's not sure he'll ever get used to it. Dr. Lecter's elbow brushes Will's arm and Will turns his head to look at him.

"I had a very good time tonight," Will says, meaning it deeply.

Dr. Lecter's eyes twinkle like the stars in the sky. He smiles at Will softly. "I had an exceptional time with you, Will. You are a very bright young man."

They're at Will's dorm now and Will finds he doesn't want to leave. He wants to stay out in the nighttime with Dr. Lecter, enjoying the surrounding trees' shadows and starlight and company. Will lingers, looking between Dr. Lecter and the door, feeling almost anxious with the desire to stay.

“I would like to see you again,” Dr. Lecter assures him. “If you please,” he adds.

Will smiles at him. “Please,” Will says simply. Dr. Lecter nods.

Will turns, opening the main front door to the boys’ dormitory and, closing it behind him, seeing Dr. Lecter standing, a shadow in the doorway, a creature of the night, watching Will.

CHAPTER V

Chapter Notes

> Serious warning for use of derogatory language towards gay people in this chapter, as well as some light smut.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will and Dr. Lecter establish a pattern of going out often, always during the day, for lunch and breakfast on the weekends, or afternoon drives during the week. Will doesn't understand the mechanics of how it happened, but Dr. Lecter has somehow vouchsafed Will permission to leave campus whenever he wishes, though Will almost never leaves before four during the week except to see Dr. Lecter. He leaves during the sanctioned times with Gio still, but when she's not allowed to leave campus, Will finds he has no interest in doing so by himself. He spent so much time alone before coming to Italy. *Maybe things are different here after all*, Will thinks as he walks the halls of the science wing.

As Will passes, a student whispers: "*Omosessuale*."

The student's friend giggles and offers in return, "*Butane*."

Will rolls his eyes, though he doesn't recognize the second word. *I guess not much has changed.* Will wonders how Dr. Lecter would react to the way other students speak to Will at school, given his antipathy to bad manners. Will imagines Dr. Lecter as a vampire, feasting on the flesh of the other students, mouth dripping with gore. The thought makes Will frown to himself, at himself, as he walks, likely making him look even stranger to outsiders. Will is more concerned with the inner machinations of his own mind than those of others.

Suddenly, Gio crashes into him, her elbow catching him in the ribs. "Fuck!" Will exclaims, clutching at his side and earning a dirty look from a professor coming out of one of the Chemistry labs. Gio just giggles, unaffected. She hooks her arm around his neck and leans some of her weight against him easily as they walk to Biology.

"What is the plan for today, my dear?" she asks cheerfully, almost managing to push those awful, unsightly thoughts from Will's brain. It's a Friday, which means Gio will likely want to go out to dance or see a movie. Will already has plans.

"I'm seeing a film with Dr. Lecter."

Gio mock gasps. "What are we seeing?" She sing-songs.

Will gives her a sideways smile, aware that she's teasing him. "*Dr. Lecter and I*," he enunciates, "are seeing *Much Ado About Nothing*." Will and Dr. Lecter haven't seen a film together before, spending most of their time eating food and visiting the countryside or bits of

beautiful architecture hidden away within it. Dr. Lecter promises to take him to Florence sometime soon, where Dr. Lecter studied medicine, and Will looks forward to that too. There's nothing like looking at Italy through Dr. Lecter's eyes. Sometimes when they're sitting together somewhere, enjoying a view, Dr. Lecter will bring out his sketchbook and graphite and begin drawing the subject in front of them. When he finishes a sketch, he will show Will proudly. Will's heart feels soft as he and Gio enter the classroom and take their seats near the front.

Another student enters the mostly-empty room and his eyes almost light up when he sees Will. Will recognizes him as one of the football players, stocky and strong, with golden-brown hair and a charming smile. Will doesn't feel charmed, however. He feels wary. The student approaches them and Will's skin begins to crawl.

"*Amichecca*," he says with a grin in Gio's direction, nodding as though it's a greeting. "*E Anormale*," he adds, looking to Will. Will doesn't understand the words but understands, from the boy's slimy, drawn-out delivery, the meaning. Will cringes, then looks to Gio, ready to hold her back from going at the boy with *claws* . She's already looking at Will. She raises her eyebrows, clearly asking Will a question he doesn't totally understand. He guesses it's along the lines of, *Do you want me to kick this guy's ass?* Will shakes his head in response. Gio's hands are balled into fists in her lap and Will watches her conscious effort to unclench them. She radiates an unspoken, reserved fury.

The boy has moved on, making his way to his seat at the back of the room, leaving Gio and Will in their seats, looking at each other. There's a moment of strangely tense silence before Will breaks by giggling. He can't help it. The whole thing is so awful, so cruel, he can't help it. Gio joins him with her high, melodic laugh. Will senses that the few other students in the room are staring at them but doesn't care. He and Gio laugh until class starts, until nothing hurts except their stomachs.

When Dr. Lecter arrives at St. Gabriel to pick Will up, Will has made up his mind not to tell him about the incident with the football player. The whole episode feels like a bad dream after the fact, and it was over so quickly. Will is morbidly curious to know how Dr. Lecter would respond (that same image of Dr. Lecter's mouth dripping red flashes in his mind), but not enough to actually detail what happened. He's equal parts afraid to find out anyways. Will climbs into the Benz and gives Dr. Lecter a smile (he thinks. It's not always easy for Will to discern which expression his face is making).

Will's not sure what his expectations are for *Much Ado About Nothing*. He's only ever read Shakespeare, and never seen it performed on stage or onscreen. He finds he usually understands the subject material, though there are gaps in his appreciation which he attributes to the changing times. He read *Much Ado About Nothing* for his AP Lit class Sophomore year and enjoyed it okay, though he didn't think it was very comical, or that any of the characters were very likable. Once they arrive, going into the theater, Will's more excited by the building, which is old-world and beautiful, with bricked exterior walls and arches, than he is about the film. The staff are all dressed as though it's the first half of the 20th century and

there are real ushers. Previously, when Will scraped together enough pocket change to see a movie, it was always inside the mall, and by himself. The carpeting had been neon colors, remaining from the heyday 80's. Here, the floors are hardwood and plush red carpet. Will doesn't know how a place like this could be so well-preserved.

Leaving the theater with Dr. Lecter, Will reflects that the film was uproariously funny. Both the jokes themselves, and the circumstances the characters found themselves in, played so well on screen. Will can't imagine seeing it all on a stage, with real, live, breathing actors.

"What did you think?" Dr. Lecter asks him as they make their way to the Benz. Will is practically bouncing on the balls of his feet, he enjoyed it so much.

"Oh, everything about it was just great. What's her name? Emma Thompson?" Will recalls the credits at the end of the movie. "She was just incredible," he says. "I wish I could see it as a play," he adds without thinking, simply because it's the truth. It doesn't occur to him that Dr. Lecter has a history of fulfilling his wildest, most off-hand wishes.

Dr. Lecter, true to his nature, replies, "I believe that could be arranged."

Will fights a smile. "Seeing the movie is wonderful, Dr. Lecter, I didn't mean to—"

Dr. Lecter has never, and doesn't now, interrupt him. Instead, he gives Will a steady look and Will stops himself. He searches the perimeter of Dr. Lecter's face, stares at each of his ears. Finally, Dr. Lecter begins to speak.

"There is nothing in the world like live theater. It is as though you are cradling the beating heart of the piece in your palm. You are being trusted with something precious. You are worthy of that privilege, Will."

Will ducks his head. They've arrived at the car and Dr. Lecter opens the door for Will while Will stares at his scuffed shoes. He's still in uniform.

"Although, I will forfeit my preference for the opera."

Will gets into the car and watches as Dr. Lecter makes his way around the vehicle, feeling interested. Will's idea of Dr. Lecter is congruent with his idea of opera. Will imagines Dr. Lecter in a narrow black and white tux, his hair expertly styled close-cropped to his skull, his shoes catching the light. Will thinks nothing about the opera would appeal to him. He imagines large men and women in gaudy costumes screeching at each other. But he also thinks it's a luxury so beyond Will's realm, there's no wonder that he wouldn't enjoy it, and there's no wonder Dr. Lecter does. Dr. Lecter slides into the driver's seat gracefully. Will continues to watch him, feeling safe to do so when Dr. Lecter isn't looking at him. Will swears he can almost see the stage lights reflecting in Dr. Lecter's deep brown eyes.

"I would very much enjoy your company at the opera some day," Dr. Lecter says to him, his voice as smooth and sweet as honey.

Will says, despite his reservations, nods his head.

He's beginning to think there's a lot he's willing to give a chance to in order to spend time with Dr. Lecter. In fact, the days between outings with Dr. Lecter seem to stretch out for miles, impossibly long and impossibly tedious by nature. Will often finds himself watching a clock, waiting for the hours to pass, when one of Gio's friends is trying to speak to him or while working on a paper. Everything leading up to spending time with Dr. Lecter feels like wasted effort. Will feels that slimy, trepidatious word in the pit of his stomach: *attached* .

When Dr. Lecter calls Will, it's always the same beleaguered fellow senior who fetches him to answer. Will feels invasive *reading* her, though he thinks sometimes he can't help it. She doesn't dislike him, despite the odds. She does think it's rather compelling gossip— that the poor American is receiving calls from a wealthy benefactor at all hours of the day and night, but she doesn't really have anyone to share this with. Will makes an effort not to pity people, but this, too, he can't always refrain from. Will watches the back of the senior's head as she leads him through the halls of St. Gabriel, to the front office where the phone is off its hook, put to hold. Will does pity her, though, perhaps hypocritically; he pities her for the same ailments he's been enduring his entire life, and he doesn't pity himself.

Once they've entered the office, the senior— whose name Will suddenly regrets not knowing, takes her seat at the desk adjacent to the secretary's and begins on some kind of paperwork. The office is empty except for the two of them, lending a great lack of privacy to Will's phone call. Will's not put off by this, however, as he picks up the phone from its place next to the cradle and puts it to his ear. He has nothing to hide.

"Hello, Will," Dr. Lecter says on the other end of the line, his voice coming through rough and crackling like a fire. "How were your classes today?"

The question strikes Will as awfully banal. Dr. Lecter usually has strange, probing questions about the nature of life itself, or Will's complicated emotional state. Very seldom does he ask about Will's life at school, except to ensure that their visits are not impeding upon Will's success (they're not). Will frowns and turns his body slightly, as if guarding the phone call. "Is something wrong?" Will asks, feeling uneasy.

Dr. Lecter chuckles. He says, "No, Will. I must admit I have a question for you, though I was hoping to ease into the cold water. I should have known better."

Will nods, feeling the tension in his shoulder unknot slightly. "What's your question?" Will asks, still wanting to get to the point. Most of his classes are boring. He sees no need to share this with Dr. Lecter.

"First I will admit to you—" Dr. Lecter begins and Will smiles, realizing that Dr. Lecter is truly not very good at 'getting to the point'. "That before we met I was not feeling like myself. It was as though I was a spector, haunting my own life."

"And now?" Will prompts him.

“I am alive.”

Will grins, and feels a warmth bloom in his stomach. “What’s your question?” he asks again.

Will can hear Dr. Lecter click his tongue at Will’s impatience, which makes his smile split even wider. Finally, Dr. Lecter answers, “I am hosting a dinner party.”

There’s a pause. Will understands what Dr. Lecter is asking of him before he finishes the sentence. “And you want me to attend,” Will states the obvious. Will can picture Dr. Lecter’s sharp smile in perfect living color. There is no response from the other end of the line. Will waits for a moment with bated breath. Dr. Lecter says nothing. “Okay,” Will says finally, not truly meaning to. “I’ll go with you.” He meant to say something like, ‘Actually, I’m not sure I’m ready for that,’ or, ‘That sounds intimidating,’ or, ‘Convince me.’ But Will doesn’t say that. He agrees. As though it’s the easiest thing in the world, saying yes to Dr. Lecter. It’s beginning to look as though it is. “I’ll go with you,” Will repeats, barely recognizing the sound of his own voice.

“You sound… unsure,” Dr. Lecter observes, pausing but not hesitating.

“I guess I am,” Will says, peering into the distance. The phone is located near the window which overlooks the parking lot. It’s a view, even with the concrete making up most of it. The parking lot is framed by olive trees, whose branches sway gently in the Autumn wind. “I’m anxious about meeting your friends, I think. And you know me,” *If anyone does,* Will thinks, “I eat strangely. I talk strangely. I am strange.”

“You are extraordinary.”

Will is struck again by the cyclical nature of he and Dr. Lecter’s relationship. The way words repeat often, the push and pull of Will’s quiet desperation to be in Dr. Lecter’s vicinity and Dr. Lecter’s apparent affection for Will, the rhythm of it all. Mostly, Will is struck by how un-extraordinary he feels. He feels like a creature, deformed and wounded, unfit to mesh with others. He feels— he *felt* alone in the world. But no longer, he supposes. He has good company in his life now, and it’s up to him to appreciate it. “I don’t mean to be ungrateful,” he says carefully. “I do want to go.”

“You would tell me if you did not want to go,” Dr. Lecter says, not a question, an assertion. Will nods into the phone, tipping his head forward and hunching his shoulders. Dr. Lecter is correct. A thought occurs to Will.

“Would it be gouache to wear the same suit I wore to dinner?” Will asks, thinking he knows the answer already.

Dr. Lecter returns with a question. “Do you like it so much you wish to wear it again?”

Will blushes, thinking of the times he’s worn the suit, together and in pieces, in the privacy of his dorm. Even when he doesn’t have time to put it on, in the mornings or between classes, he runs his hands over the material, just to remember the feel. He’s spent, summatively, hours looking in the mirror, *admiring* himself. His favorite past-time is putting on the suit when his hair’s still damp from the shower, and slicking it down to more closely resemble Dr. Lecter’s.

Despite Will's common misunderstanding of social cues, he recognizes that this behavior is extremely humiliating. Still, he reveals to Dr. Lecter, "I've worn it since the dinner." He makes an attempt to keep his statement vague, though he knows Dr. Lecter will probe him with questions, getting something like the whole truth from him eventually. He guesses, somewhere deep down inside himself, that this is what he truly wants.

"Is it the suit itself you enjoy, Will, or is it the feeling of being dressed by someone else?" Dr. Lecter asks softly and Will knows by 'someone else' he means himself.

Will nods his head again, forgetting for a moment that Dr. Lecter isn't there to see him. "Yes," Will answers. His eyes are closed. His throat feels dry. It clicks when he speaks again. "Yes, I like being dressed by you." This conversation, though there's nothing truly wrong with it, feels indecent, especially to be had in public. Will wishes desperately he and Dr. Lecter were alone together— where, he doesn't know. All the same, he feels thrilled by the conversation— why, he also doesn't know. Will takes a deep breath in. "If I asked you to buy me another one— would you?" he asks, feeling as though he's just fired the trigger in a game of russian roulette. His heart rabbit-beats in his chest and his hand, holding the phone close to his ear, is clammy.

"Consider it done," Dr. Lecter answers swiftly.

Will, feeling on the edge, or maybe fallen off of it already, returns with, "As long as I behave well, right?" He pictures, again, Dr. Lecter's smile.

Back at his dorm, Will strips as soon as he's through the door. He opens the large dresser across the room from his double bed. Most of his clothes are in a pile at the base of the dresser but the suit hangs on a felt cloth hanger. He removes the suit jacket carefully, almost reverently. He can still hear Dr. Lecter's voice in his head, over and over again: his raspy chuckle, his, "Yes, Will. So long as you behave." Will shrugs on the suit jacket and runs his hands over the material, feeling his heartbeat slow for the first time since confessing this very act to Dr. Lecter. Will pauses in his ritual to remove the suit pants from the hanger and step into them. He leaves them unbuttoned but they're so perfectly tailored to him, they hug his hips regardless. Will closes his eyes briefly, savoring this. He returns to his practice of feeling the material of the jacket once again.

Will walks across the room, and sits at his bed. He does his best to banish Dr. Lecter's voice from his mind, though it's difficult, knowing what he's about to do. He lays back, shuffles slightly so only one leg is hanging off the bed and sticks his hand down the pants.

Most of the time, when Will masturbates, it's mechanical, perfunctory, and without imagination. He focuses on the physical sensation, and nothing else. All things considered, Will most likely masturabates more frequently than other teenage boys his age, as it's part of his self soothing self-stimulation ritual. He masturbates during his shower in the morning and before he goes to bed at night and often runs back to his dorm between classes to calm down by doing so. Never, never after calls or visits with Dr. Lecter, though. Sometimes, most times, Will wants to. He comes back to the dorm after seeing Dr. Lecter feeling hot and itchy and

often overstimulated, and only wants to relieve himself, to release some of the tension in his body, to *calm down*.

This, however, is anything but mechanical, perfunctory, or calm. Will touches himself desperately, fervently. It should be too dry but it's not as Will leaks pre-ejaculate all over his hand, the opalescent rivulets running down his pink knuckles. Will looks down at the red head of his cock peeking out through the open suit pants and the sight makes him moan. He's still not *picturing* anything but the thought of being wanted so badly, having so much money spent on him, just to be ruined, makes Will hot all over. Will reaches up to clench his free hand in his hair, tugging slightly, enjoying the sensation while deliberately *not* imagining it as someone else's hands on him. As wretched as this affair is, Will maintains a degree of self control. He forces his mind blank, reaches his hand back to the suit, focuses on the feel of the material in one hand and his own wet, smooth skin in the other.

It's over almost before it starts. Will ejaculates in a rope across his stomach.

He lies still for a moment, resting his wet hand palm-up on the sheets beside him and placing his other, cooler hand on his forehead. He forces his breath to come slow. When he sits up, unthinkingly, the pool of liquid cooling on his stomach drips down, truly ruining the waistband of the suit pants. Will gasps, and tries to catch some of it with his clean hand. "Shit, shit, shit, shit," Will mutters under his breath. In the moment, the idea of ruining the suit was borderline-pornographic, but in practice Will feels deeply regretful and embarrassed. Will rushes to the tiny ensuite, stripping the pants as he goes, and begins to run them under the stream of sink water, wetting the cuffs of the suit sleeves as he does so. "Fuck," Will whispers, setting the pants down in the bowl of the sink to flap his hands for a moment, feeling upset.

Finally, Will gives up. He wrings the pants and throws them into the laundry hamper.

He lays back on his bed, in the same position as before, now starkly naked and clean. He doesn't feel clean. He feels sick and nervous, sweating slightly under his arms. He's not sure how he's going to bear seeing Dr. Lecter the following week. He prays for God to strike him down at that moment, feeling more like a sinner than he has since early childhood, since leaving the church at 15. He doesn't know what he did that feels so wrong. Touching himself in the suit? Ruining the suit? No. Perhaps it's what he didn't do that makes Will feel so sick. What he can't bring himself to think about, even in the privacy of his own mind. The one thing about which he can't be honest.

Chapter End Notes

Omosessuale: Homosexual
Butane: Whore
Amichecca: Fag-hag
Anormale: Faggot

CHAPTER VI

Dr. Lecter arrives to pick Will up for the dinner party around sunset. The parking lot is painted in a heaven-sent golden hue and Will is deeply, irrationally afraid Dr. Lecter will know what he's done. His palms sweat and he wipes them against his pants— the new pants of the new suit, a material equally as non-offensive but nothing like the first suit, thank God. Will feels the phantom sensation of the original suit pants there. His stomach turns over. Is he going to be sick? *No,* Will thinks, *no, no. Dr. Lecter will not find me vomiting in the St. Gabriel staff parking lot.* And he doesn't. Dr. Lecter's car pulls up and Will is standing stock-still, his hands in little white fists at his sides, not vomiting. Will gets into the Benz.

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat and doesn't speak. Dr. Lecter gives him a brief, curious look but says nothing. Realistically, Will knows he has nothing to be afraid of. Dr. Lecter is not a mind-reader. He has no idea what Will did in the suit he bought Will. Will considers also that, were Dr. Lecter to find out… Will's not sure it would bother him. Will gives credence to the fact that nothing Will has done so far, strange as it may be, has turned Dr. Lecter off of him. *There's a valley of difference between an autistic meltdown and masturbation,* a voice in Will's head says, equal parts biting and fair. Will feels torn, wanting to believe Dr. Lecter would remain unbothered, were Will to tell him what he's done, and knowing the threat of Dr. Lecter's disfavor will prevent him from ever doing so.

"What disturbs you?" Dr. Lecter asks him finally, disrupting his spiraling thought process. Will looks out the window, feeling the view is safer than Dr. Lecter's face at the moment.

There's a silence. Will knows what he's going to say before he opens his mouth, understanding that he *is* going to tell the truth. No matter what he wants to do, he's going to be honest. He closes his eyes, wishing he were someone else. Anyone else. "I stained the suit. The first suit you—" *gifted*, Will thinks unhelpfully, getting a shiver, "gave me. I ejaculated onto the waistband." There it is. The ugly fucking truth, seminal and slimy. Will feels slightly sick to his stomach once again and wishes he had the courage to roll the window down. But he can't. He feels paralyzed, as though Dr. Lecter's a predator who won't be able to see him if he doesn't move. Will feels eternally grateful that Dr. Lecter keeps his eyes so diligently on the road and won't risk a glance at him. He's desperate to be unseen. He feels hopelessly exposed.

"Masturbation is the true sign of a healthy young man," Dr. Lecter says smoothly. "If you would so please, I would be happy to send the suit to a— *clandestine* dry cleaner." Dr. Lecter does risk a glance at Will then and whatever he sees on Will's face makes him smile softly. "There is no need to be embarrassed, Will. This is a natural part of your evolution." *Of course,* Will thinks, *of course you would use the word 'evolution' and not 'growth'.*

"The whole thing felt rather… *devolved*," Will admits under his breath.

"Depravity is vital to development," Dr. Lecter replies simply.

Will feels as though he's let out a sigh of relief. He was right. His fear was irrational. Though he still feels something akin to humiliation deep in the pit of his stomach. His skin is still a livewire and his underarms still burn with sweat and yet, nothing bad happened. God did not strike him down, and neither did Dr. Lecter. Will tries to think of something else to say. Anything else. "How many people will be at the dinner party?" Will comes up with, genuinely interested but mostly looking for a different channel of conversation.

"I have invited only my dear friends. However, if it becomes too much, at any moment, I will bring you back to St. Gabriel."

Will shakes his head. He's made up his mind about this. "I'm going to stay," he says clearly.

Dr. Lecter, of course, doesn't argue with him. "In that case," he says, "should you need a reprieve from the evening, no one will disturb you in the hindquarters of the flat." Will wonders what 'hindquarters' includes, recognizing the word only from butcher shops, back home, in the city. He wonders where Dr. Lecter picked it up. Will looks out the window and takes in the drive. Tuscany is more beautiful than any other place Will has ever seen, even in photos. It's beautiful *everywhere*. Will sometimes struggles to take it in. Will looks back at Dr. Lecter's profile, which is objectively more beautiful and certainly more interesting to look at. Dr. Lecter is speaking, Will realizes. "You told me over the course of our phone conversation that you are anxious. What is it that you are afraid of?" Will grips his thumb tightly in his palm to avoid self-stimulating, just the thought of his conversation with Dr. Lecter and his anxiety surrounding meeting Dr. Lecter's friends making him want to do so.

"I am… afraid," Will admits, "of embarrassing myself—" Will stops. That's not what he's afraid of. He corrects, "Of embarrassing *you*." Will closes his eyes. The fear is so— so *real*, it's as though what he's afraid of has already happened. He's so familiar with that old, sunken-childhood feeling of trying to make conversation with others, feeling as if you're talking from behind a thick pane of glass. So many times, Will has ruined everything this way, it might as well have happened once more.

But Dr. Lecter doesn't seem to think so. He shakes his head, never once taking his eyes off the road. "If you think I am capable of being embarrassed by you, I am afraid you are sorely mistaken. It is a privilege to know you and, as I am sure you have observed, the wealthy have a proclivity for flaunting their privileges." Dr. Lecter pauses for a moment and Will says nothing, trying to absorb and process what Dr. Lecter's just said to him. A complicated expression passes over Dr. Lecter's face and he says, "I apologize. I am not sure if what I have just said was intended to comfort you or not."

Will blinks. He's… shocked. Dr. Lecter was trying to manipulate him in some way, he guesses, to make him feel like *property.* But then Dr. Lecter… caught himself? Stopped himself? Will is reminded of the phone call with Dr. Lecter wherein he was punished for rejecting Dr. Lecter, and fell asleep wondering what Dr. Lecter's intentions were. Will looks at Dr. Lecter dead-on and realizes he still doesn't know. He has no idea why Dr. Lecter has invested so much money and time and fucking *energy* into him. He has no idea why Dr. Lecter sat in the driver's seat, unphased, smiling pleasantly and enigmatically as Will explained that he ejaculated onto an expensive suit Dr. Lecter bought him. Will has no idea what Dr. Lecter sees in him. None at all.

“Thank you,” Will says finally, feeling it’s inadequate. He means, *Thank you for the suits. Thank you for the hindquarters. Thank you for looking into me and not looking away.* Will is thanking him for all the things he doesn’t understand.

Dr. Lecter and Will arrive at Dr. Lecter’s apartment before any of the other guests. Will observes this gratefully, understanding that Dr. Lecter is giving him time to acclimate to the environment before introducing any new people.

And the apartment is— it’s unbelievable. Decorated strictly with dark wood furniture, the place seems to have a warm, inner glow. There’s some art on the walls, none of it Will recognizes, meaning none of it is Dr. Lecter’s own creation. There are some dried flowers in vases but nothing excessive. Nothing which emits a smell, except for the indescribable and inoffensive smell of Dr. Lecter himself. The decor is decidedly, neither masculine nor feminine. Will is comforted by this, though the environment is anything but neutral. The plush Oriental rug laying the length of the entryway, the reflection of Will’s face in the polished dark wood of a nearby side table pressed flush to the wall, the painting of a beautiful, stone-faced asian woman above the table, *everything* boasts Dr. Lecter’s tastes. Will can’t imagine what dinner will be.

Dinner isn’t for some time.

First, Dr. Lecter takes Will on a tour of the apartment. It’s large, with many small rooms and one large dining room. The dining room is spectacular, with a single round table in the middle of the room, and a vase of fresh cut flowers set as the centerpiece.

Past the dining room, the comparatively small living room, guest bath, and kitchen, are what Dr. Lecter referred to as the ‘hindquarters’. This includes a small sitting room and two bedrooms, each with an ensuite. Dr. Lecter shows Will only the doors to the bedrooms, and then the sitting room. It’s then that Will asks, “How do you afford all this space?” Dr. Lecter gives Will a bemused, almost fond look. Will reconsiders what he just said, mulling it over in his head. He asks, “Was that a rude question?”

Dr. Lecter does not answer Will’s question. Instead, as he takes a seat in a plush armchair near an imposing bookshelf, he says, “Princess Alexandra of Bavaria— have you ever heard that name?”

Will, remaining standing, shakes his head, *No.*

“Princess Alexandra was a cleanly, clever young girl, a little older than you. She wore only white.” Dr. Lecter folds his hands in his lap. “She was delusional. It is her delusion that we remember, and not her disposition.” Will wants to look around the room, skim the titles on the shelves, but he doesn’t. He hangs on to Dr. Lecter’s every word, like the sick puppy he is. “Alexandra believed she was made of glass. This delusion was very popular among nobility through the sixteenth and seventeenth century— the belief that one is too pure, too fragile for this world, that the slightest touch may… *shatter*… one’s very being.” Dr. Lecter, again, Will notices, pauses but doesn’t hesitate, as if it’s for dramatic effect. “I believe, Will,” Dr. Lecter

says and if Will were a puppy, he thinks, his ears would *perk*, up at that very moment, at the mention of his own name, “that this is a glass house built for the person I was… *meant* to be, and that I am afforded all the purity and fragility which so accompanies.” Will scans Dr. Lecter’s face, avoiding his gaze, tracking down his neck to the complicated tie at his throat— not a regular tie. *A cravat,* Will’s brain supplies. Dr. Lecter is a strange creature, Will is reminded. Strange, and perhaps tortured. *Hurt*, at the very least. Yes. Hurt. “Tell me, Will,” Dr. Lecter says and Will thinks, so directly at him, *What happened to you?* that he's sure Dr. Lecter must hear his thoughts. “What is the house that has been built around you made of? What are you made of?”

Will blinks at Dr. Lecter, considering his question. As he thinks, he wanders the room in a slow, even loop, looking at each item of decor and book title and the tea set resting on the settee. Will thinks back to the moment he first met Dr. Lecter, a moment he hasn’t considered in weeks. The moment he felt himself… transform into… something. Something dead, or awful, or both. “Sometimes I feel like…” Will stops in his meandering journey. He closes his eyes, and he can almost feel it. “Like I’m a corpse, who’s still walking around. A zombie, I guess. Made of flesh, but not a person.” Will opens his eyes and Dr. Lecter’s staring at him dead-on. Will quickly looks away.

“Is it the corpse of your body?” Dr. Lecter asks him and Will pockets his hands because he thinks they’ve begun to shake. “Or someone else’s?”

The question hangs in the air for a moment. Will remembers the snap of his own ribs breaking— not his. Not his own ribs. None of it… none of it was *him*, truly. “I’m afraid…” Will says, his voice barely above a whisper, “it was someone else. *I was someone else* .” Will finally looks back at Dr. Lecter, unable to meet his eyes but fixated on his mouth, forming words.

“Your name is Will Graham,” Dr. Lecter says, his voice firm and the words feeling familiar and foreign all at once. “You are in my apartment in Florence, Italy.” Will takes a deep breath in. “It is just past seven PM in the evening.” He lets the breath out. He is Will Graham. *I am Will Graham*. He is.

He is.

Guests arrive to the dinner party in a slow but steady stream, never exceeding a group number larger than two. Each person who knocks on the door is young, beautiful, sparkling, and greets Dr. Lecter in French or Italian, and Will in English. Will can’t help but to internally shake his head at each accented English introduction. He’s going to buy a shirt that says, ‘Speak to me in Italian’. Despite this, Will must forfeit that each guest is exceptionally kind and well-mannered and makes Will feel as though he’s normal, despite the fact that he knows he’s acting just as strange as ever. Dr. Lecter even, in an effort to keep Will from getting overstimulated, speaks quietly to Will one-on-one in between guests entering the apartment. Will appreciates this, and it helps.

Dr. Lecter leaves Will for a moment to attend to the food, apologizing profusely, and Will stands awkwardly by himself in the corner of the living room. He becomes fixated on a bookshelf nearby, scanning the titles. Many are in languages he doesn't speak— German, and Japanese mostly, though Will does recognize a fair amount of English. There's everything from classics to contemporary; however, Will notices a favor towards philosophical texts.

"Don't be nervous," A voice whispers in an American accent in Will's ear. Will startles, whipping around to see who's speaking to him, eyes wide. The woman— Selena, Will's pretty sure, is pretty, tall, with a cascade of black curls falling down her right shoulder and a hooked nose. She smiles at Will. Her irises, he notices before quickly breaking eye contact, are nearly black. "Hannibal's vetted everyone who's here tonight. It's elites only, sweetheart. We're all dying to meet you, pretty young thing that you are," she winks at him, "and *you*, you're Hannibal's *favorite*."

Will nods, looks at his shoes, says, "Thank you," quietly.

Selena reaches a hand out and places it on Will's upper arm gently. Will looks up at her, still avoiding her eyes. She's smiling warmly at him. He notices her dark lip color, in contrast against her sparkling white teeth. Something squirms in the pit of Will's stomach; he's made to feel uncomfortable and safe all at once. He feels strangely… *relieved* by her words. He can't be Dr. Lecter's *'favorite*', whatever that means but it's nice that Selena thinks so, and that Dr. Lecter has apparently screened each attendee, though Will already suspected as much, giving Dr. Lecter's mile-wide protective streak. Will isn't ready to address the 'pretty' comment, even in his own head. Will fixates on Selena's bare shoulder. She's really very beautiful.

"*Where* is the good doctor?" Someone interrupts the din of conversation throughout the room, their volume unnaturally loud. Selena turns her head to look at the person speaking and Will follows her gaze. At the door is a grinning man with a rosy, alcohol-induced glow about him. He looks around the room and catches Will's eye. Will looks away but it's too late. The man is already on his way over. Will cringes, looking to Selena desperately. She looks back at him with a complicated expression, perhaps apologetic. "Selena, Selena, Selena," the man says as he approaches. "You become more beautiful each time I see you." He sidles up next to Selena and Will takes a step back. He has no affinity towards drunk people. The man asks Selena, his voice still too loud, "Tell me, what's your secret? Blood of the innocent?" Selena rolls her eyes. Then, the man turns his attention to Will, God help him. "And you… you must be Will Graham. The doctor's little protegé. As petite as I had hoped. How charming."

Will looks back at his shoes. Brand new dress shoes Dr. Lecter bought him, pleasant but not too formal, he had explained. Perfect for the occasion. The man's tone makes Will feel suddenly ashamed for having them.

"I'm Zihan. Or would you prefer to call me Mr. Chen?"

"He's seventeen, Zihan, not seven," Selena intercuts. "He's an adult."

"He's *cute* is what he is," Zihan returns. Then, he reaches out to touch Will, his arm or shoulder or something, and Will cringes away. It's then that Dr. Lecter enters.

“Is everything alright?” he asks, smiling pleasantly at Zihan.

“Just toying with your new… *toy*,” Zihan says, then laughs at his own joke, loudly.

Will feels hot and itchy all over. “Excuse me,” he says under his breath and quickly makes his exit towards the hindquarters of the apartment. He walks quickly, tears of embarrassment brimming in his eyes, threatening to spill. He opens the door most directly in front of him once he realizes he’s walking briskly down the hallway connecting the front and back of the apartment, and steps inside the room.

It’s Hannibal Lecter’s bedroom.

Not that Will cares at the moment. He sits down on a chaise longue in front of the bed, heavily. He covers his face with his hands. Will feels humiliated. He feels as though he was skinned and hanged, all his insides put on display for the world to see. He feels embarrassed about things he didn’t even know he was supposed to be embarrassed by. And worst of all, Dr. Lecter must have seen at least some of it. Heard some of it. Dr. Lecter must be coming to the realization right now that Will is a pathetic child hanging on Dr. Lecter’s coat-tails and actually, truly, worth very little. This, in conjunction with the masturbation incident… Jesus Christ, Will is so fucked. He takes a deep breath in. *I need to calm down*, Will scolds himself sternly. He’s not crying anymore, thank God. He’s only breathing heavily, trying to think of something else. He pulls his hands away and looks up, taking in the room around him for the first time.

It’s intimidating, slightly. The walls are a dark, maroon color with a slightly deeper red pinstriping up and down. On the wall across from the bed is a full length mirror. Will blushes at his own reflection, thinking back to the time he masturbated in front of his own mirror back at the St. Gabriel dorm. He wonders why Dr. Lecter would choose to place the mirror exactly there, if not for that genre of purpose. An image flashes in his mind of Dr. Lecter there in his bedroom, standing in front of the mirror, undoing the buttons of his pants. Will blinks the image away quickly, looking around the room desperately, searching for something else to land his eyes on. In the corner across from the plush king-sized bed, next to the large mirror, is a full suit of Samurai armor, all red and black and gold. The suit of armor emits a threatening aura, as though it’s had a life of its own. Will stands slowly, makes his way towards the suit. It shimmers, as though it’s drawing him in. He reaches a hand out.

There’s a knock on the door. “May I come in?” Dr. Lecter’s voice asks from the other side, as calm as ever.

Will drops his hand, returns to his seat at the chaise longue. “Yes,” he answers, only his voice comes out raspier than he meant it to. He clears his throat and repeats himself, “Yes.”

Dr. Lecter enters the room.

“I must apologize sincerely for Zihan’s behavior. A cab has been called to return him to whatever septic tank he crawled out of, immediately. Had I known—”

Will stops him with a raised hand. “It’s okay,” he says. Dr. Lecter pauses, looking lost and strangely out of place, then takes a seat next to Will on the chaise longue. They sit together in

silence for a moment before a thought occurs to Will. “Is Zihan a close friend?” Will asks Dr. Lecter, remembering what Selena said about *‘elites only’*.

“Not anymore,” Dr. Lecter says simply, enunciating each word. “Tonight was the last night Zihan will *see* the inside of these walls, I’m afraid.” Will shakes his head, smiling to himself. Dr. Lecter raises his almost-nonexistent eyebrows inquisitively.

“It’s just—” Will starts, trying to collect his thoughts. “I’m starting to think you’re not afraid of anything.” Dr. Lecter looks at Will with a modicum of surprise and Will’s surprised too. He doesn’t know where that came from. There’s nothing particularly scary about throwing out an obnoxious drunk. Though, maybe it’s the way Dr. Lecter said it, as though Zihan would return somehow, only without seeing the inside of the apartment. Will tries to work that out in his mind and can’t. He drops it. “I should thank you,” he says, feeling as though it’s the first ‘normal’ thing he’s said all night. “I don’t think anyone’s ever kicked someone out on my behalf before.” Dr. Lecter gives Will a rueful smile and Will notices, for the first time, how close they are. Their hands, each resting on the seat between them, brush gently. “Thank you,” Will says, only his voice comes out raspy and rough. Maybe Will imagines it but it seems as if Dr. Lecter tips his head a millimeter forward.

“I’m afraid—” Dr. Lecter begins but stops himself, swallows. Will’s eyes catch on the bob of Dr. Lecter’s throat as he does so. “I do not wish to upset you further, Will,” he says, his head moving closer. Will realizes he’s shifted forward as well.

"I'm not upset," Will says softly. Will and Dr. Lecter are so close, their noses brush. When Will speaks again, he says only one word, three syllables, his voice a whisper: “*Hannibal.*”

And Will kisses him.

CHAPTER VII

Will returns to his dorm around midnight and, instead of heading straight to bed, opts to wander the grounds, reflecting on the events of the evening, despite the sluggishness in his limbs. The trees above Will's head rustle softly in the wind, and wildlife scratch and scuffle in the bushes lining the school's perimeter, and beyond that there's silence. The silence of a small, quiet town. Will feels, for the first time since moving to Italy, earnestly grateful. He closes his eyes and can picture it all in vivid, techni-color:

Hannibal pulls away from Will and Will registers Hannibal's hand against his cheek, holding him steady. Hannibal does not pull his hand away, despite what he says next. "I feel I am taking advantage of you," he says.

Will shakes his head adamantly. "You're not," he insists, and kisses Hannibal once more.

And more, and more, and more, until their mouths are wet and red and nearly sore and Will can't stop grinning, can't stop pulling away to look into Hannibal's dark eyes, can't stop asking to be kissed again.

When Hannibal pulls away, Will knows why before he opens his mouth. Hannibal's nostrils flare and he turns his head, looking towards the door. "I lament that dinner is ready," Hannibal says, looking back to Will, sounding truly regretful, which Will finds flattering. Will smiles, nods, stands. He holds a hand out for Hannibal to take and, looking up at him as though he's something very precious, Hannibal takes his hand.

Will's sitting now, at the base of his tree. He looks up and realizes he can just make out the pale moon through the shadowy branches and leaves. Will closes his eyes and it's as though he's still there— still by Hannibal's side.

Hannibal reaches for his glass of wine and his arm brushes Will's. Will looks at Hannibal and they miraculously maintain eye contact as Will takes his first bite of food of the night and Hannibal his sip of wine. They swallow in synchronization.

"How does it taste?" Hannibal asks him, watching his mouth.

Will licks his lips without meaning to. "Extraordinary," he answers.

Will is still in the suit Hannibal bought him, now slightly creased and made dirty from sitting on the grassy ground, and Will feels the material. Hannibal hadn't done anything so forward

as to rest his hand on Will's thigh on the car ride back to St. Gabriel, but he did steal glances at Will when he thought Will wasn't looking.

"You were being rather transparent at dinner, Will," Dr. Lecter says, facing the road once again, both hands on the wheel. "Was that your intention?"

Will stands quickly, taking a deep breath in. He begins the trek to the boys' dorms, walking swiftly, feeling as though the brisk wind is chasing him back to his room. He makes his way there in record time, taking the steps two at once, and collapses on the floor, sitting against the door, once he's inside. Will knocks his head gently against the thick wooden door and lets out a breath he feels he's been holding all night.

Will stands up slowly, makes his way over to his bed. This time, before anything irreversible gets started, Will strips out of the suit, hangs it carefully in his closet, and sits on the bed in just his boxer-briefs. Will rests his right hand on his stomach and his left hand on his inner thigh. He feels the fine hair there and the slightly thicker hair leading in a trail down to his pelvis. Will's right hand migrates lower down the trail of his stomach. He reaches into his underwear, feeling the head of his cock. His hand shifts to grip the shaft of his cock, and he begins masturbating in earnest. He covers his mouth with his free hand in an attempt to muffle the noise he's making.

Will touches himself and wishes desperately he could hear the sound of Hannibal's voice. He imagines it's Hannibal's hand over his mouth, forcing him to be silent and *take it*. He imagines filthy things Hannibal would say to him, sounding beautiful in Hannibal's fine, lilted accent. Will thumbs at the tip of his cock and swears, *swears* he can hear Hannibal's voice in his ear. *"Good boy, Will,"* he can imagine Hannibal saying. *"Good boy."*

The next morning, Will wakes up to a knock on his door. It's the same beleaguered senior—Dora, he's since learned, is her name, looking as semi-non-interested as always and holding a stack of paper. "*Telefonata*," she says in her flat tone. "Sorry," she corrects, "Phone for you." Will doesn't bother telling her she needn't correct herself. Will walks with her to the front office and knows, before he even nears the phone, that Hannibal is calling to check up on him.

Thankfully, once he actually picks up the phone, Hannibal doesn't actually 'check up'.

Instead, Hannibal asks him, "Is your full name 'William'?"

"No," Will answers.

"'Wilber'?"

“Just Will,” Will says, thinking that perhaps Hannibal’s teasing him. His mouth twists into a small smile. Will’s found he likes being teased by people he cares deeply for. “Why do you ask?” Will asks curiously. They’re not alone together in the office; Dora sits at her desk and types away at the secretary’s chunky computer, shifting through the stack of papers she brought in with her.

Hannibal answers, “I prefer to address packages with the addressee’s full name.”

Will’s smile breaks into a grin. “Are you sending me something, Hannibal?” he asks, relishing using Hannibal’s first name. He hopes, deep in the pit of his stomach, that Hannibal appreciates it as well.

“I think it is the fad these days for teenagers to own *mobile phones*,” Hannibal says, “if I am not mistaken.”

“You say that like you’re much older than you truly are,” Will says, leaning his shoulder against the wall the phone is attached to casually, feeling truly comfortable and at peace. “Do you have a cellphone?” Will asks, having trouble imagining Hannibal using something so fashionable, so of-the-times.

“Yes,” Hannibal answers. “I have found it to be convenient, though slightly mortifying.”

Will laughs. *That,* he can picture. Hannibal with a sleek little cellphone tucked between his shoulder and ear, chatting away, the whole time highly conscious of how he looks to the outside world. “Wait—” Will says, realizing what Hannibal’s getting at. “Are you going to buy me a cellphone?” This, Will’s not so sure he’s keen on.

“I have already bought it.”

“I don’t know if I…” Will begins but trails off, imagining Hannibal’s piercing gaze. “How much—” Will starts but stops again. “Okay,” he says finally, feeling like he’s losing something. A piece of himself, maybe. Becoming more of… something else. Something soft and sweet. Totally unlike Will. And yet, Will doesn’t mourn this loss. Instead, he says, “Thank you,” like it’s easy for him when it isn’t. He says, “I’ll be glad to be able to speak to you when we’re not together.” Then, Will says what he really means, the honest, uncomfortable truth: “I miss you. When we’re not together.”

“That means very much to me, Will,” Hannibal says after a short pause, the moment feeling dangerously tender. “More than you know.” Will feels Hannibal’s words as though they’re piercing through his chest, it’s so sincere. Will wants to take the words with him back to his dorm, curl up with them, fall asleep in their arms. Will *wants*, so much, everything, all the time. He feels it all in his body, in his chest and stomach, down to his fingertips. And Will—Will feels more for Hannibal Lecter than he has for anyone else, any*thing* else. Will feels warmth and hunger and a million other things for Hannibal and struggles to express it all, but wants to anyway. He tries. He tries. *I miss you,* he thinks. *Come here. Be with me. I miss you.*

“I miss you,” Will says quietly, suddenly very aware of Dora’s presence, of the fact that she’s ceased in her typing. “More than you know.”

Later that day, after time spent with Gio and her friends, getting coffee and sludging through homework (Will doesn't struggle with it but some of Gio's friends do and Will does his best to help), Will returns to his dorm. Instead of feeling tired, he's buzzing with energy. At the base of the door to his room is a small package in simple, brown wrapping paper with a neat, dancing script. The package is addressed to him, and Will lifts the little box up dutifully, running his hand over his own name in Hannibal's perfect handwriting.

Will shoulders the door open and, embarrassingly, hugs the package to his chest.

He makes his way through the room, toeing his shoes off as he goes and kicking them towards his dresser. He sits down on the edge of his bed with the package on his lap and tears it open like a little kid on Christmas. The brown paper flies in every direction and Will, for a moment, laments the loss of his name. Underneath the brown package is a sleek black box with a note attached. The note reads: *A gift for Will. — H.L.* Will rolls that word over in his mind, mouths it. *Gift. Gift, gift, gift.* Will opens the box carefully and, set in foam, is an impossibly tiny device with a glossy green screen taking up most of the surface area. *A gift,* Will thinks, *just for me.* Will excavates the phone from the foam and searches for a power button. He was sure it would come needing to be charged but, then, perhaps Hannibal already charged it. The phone powers on and the screen is illuminated with an overwhelming series of options. Will uses the buttons at the base of the phone to navigate to '*Contacts*'. There's only one option available. *Hannibal Lecter.* Will presses the '*Select*' button.

Hannibal picks up the phone on the first ring. "Will," he answers simply, not a question. Will finds he still gets a thrill at each of Hannibal's mentions of his name.

"Thank you," Will says, feeling gratitude radiate throughout him. "Thank you for everything." Will's hand, without his permission, begins to play with the hem of his shirt, then the hem of his pants. "I don't think I express how much it all means to me the way I want to." Will closes his eyes, letting his fingers trail the outline of his cock through his trousers. "I think about it a lot, though. For the record." Will lets out a gasp as his hand brushes the head of his cock through his pants and quickly moves his hand to cover his mouth. He breathes harshly into his palm, wetting it slightly.

Hannibal doesn't mention the sound Will emitted, nor the possible connotations. He says, "The woman at the store asked who I was shopping for," Will moves his hand slowly, ever so slowly, back to his pelvis, "which I found rude. I also found… I was at a loss for what to tell her." Will, without meaning to, bucks slightly into the heel of his palm and lets out another small gasp. This time, feeling too good to stop what he's doing, doesn't move his hand away. Hannibal continues speaking, "It is difficult to define our relationship. You are very dear to me, Will Graham, but I was unable to describe to someone so incidental as an electronics shop employee the nature of our bond. How would you describe us, Will?" Hannibal asks and it takes Will a full second to register the question. Will takes a breath in and answers.

"Friends," he lets out in a gasp, not stopping the motion of his hand. "We're friends."

“Indeed,” Hannibal answers smoothly, not acknowledging Will’s breathlessness, which is surely noticeable and therefore dubious. “We are friends. Something like the great friendships of history, I suppose.” Will holds the phone tightly between his ear and shoulder and reaches down to undo his pants. Once they’re undone he grabs the phone with his right hand, switching it to his opposite ear, and uses his left hand to begin stroking himself in earnest. “Like Patroclus and Achilles, perhaps. Their union was divinely tended— righteous, even. And after Patroclus’ death, Achilles asked that their ashes may be joined together, and they may rest eternally hand in hand.” Will takes a deep breath in, twists his wrist, and lets it out. A bead of precum travels down the shaft of his cock and Will catches his hand, spreading the liquid over his cock to make the motion easier. Hannibal continues, “Or, would you prefer a more contemporary example?” he asks, “Such as James Dean and Sal Mineo?” Will squeezes the base of his cock, staving off his orgasm, wanting to last a little longer, hear Hannibal talk a little more. “Iconic Hollywood starlets.” Hannibal says. “Two artists, alike in their pursuits and differing in their experiences. Gone too soon. Another tragedy.” And it’s with that word — *tragedy*, that Will ejaculates over his own cock and stomach. Will works himself through the aftershocks, breathing deeply, not caring for a moment if Hannibal catches on.

The more Will breathes deeply in and out and comes back to himself, the more he’s sure Hannibal *does* know. Hannibal must know. If he were here, he’d be able to *smell* it on Will. The thought sends a shiver down Will’s spine and he takes another shuddery breath in. But then— why didn’t Hannibal say anything? Did he… Did he *want* Will to keep going? To get off to just the sound of Hannibal’s voice? To touch himself desperately, fervently, wishing all the while that Hannibal himself was there to do it for him. “Do you…” Will starts, unsure what he wants to say. “Was that…” He finds, despite his affliction for honesty, he can’t say it. “Are we okay?” he asks finally, getting to the root of his worry. He really does just want to know if they’re okay, to make sure Hannibal’s not upset with him, not *grossed out* by him.

“Everything is alright,” Hannibal says and Will wishes he could read Hannibal the way he can read other people, to know if it’s true.

CHAPTER VIII

Hannibal appears one morning in Will's first period Philosophy class.

"*Dottore Lecter*," the teacher— Prof. Perez says, blinking in surprise. Will watches with wide eyes as Hannibal nods a greeting to the rest of the class, his eyes lingering on Will— or maybe it's Will's imagination, and as Hannibal turns his back slightly, facing away from the students, and begins to murmur in low Italian to Perez. Perez nods profusely, then looks to Will sharply. He beckons Will forward and Will, nervously, brooks. "Signore Will," Perez says, leaning close to Will, into his personal space and grabbing his arm, as though trying to speak to Will without Hannibal hearing. Will looks briefly at Hannibal, whose demeanor is perfectly pleasant, though Will can tell, for a split second, that Hannibal's displeased. "Dr. Lecter has requested your presence for the morning. I trust you will behave well?" Perez says and Will nods his head in acquiescence. Perez releases Will's arm and Will looks back at Hannibal with large eyes. Hannibal wears an inscrutable yet dark expression. It sends a shiver down Will's spine.

Hannibal nods his head slightly, towards the door, and it takes Hannibal turning around, making his way all the way to the Benz, and Will following him for Will to realize he and Hannibal made unbroken eye contact, and Will didn't even *notice*. Will thinks back to what he said to Hannibal during their first meal together: "*There's no cure.*" Will still believes that. There is no cure for him. So what is this? What does *this* mean? Will shakes his head as though he can physically shake off the thoughts. He doesn't want them— the only thing he wants is to follow Hannibal. To follow him anywhere.

"Where are we going?" Will asks as Hannibal opens the car door for him. *And since when do you pick me up in the middle of a school day?* Will thinks privately.

As though Hannibal can hear him, he answers, "I believe that it has been a long time since you have done something reckless." Will climbs into the passenger seat without answering and Hannibal shuts the door behind him. He thinks, *You haven't known me that long*, a little bitterly, perhaps bitter *that* Hannibal hasn't known him that long. Soon he's distracted though, as Hannibal slides into the driver's seat and gears the car into reverse. Hannibal twists his body to look over the car seat headrest and rests his right hand on Will's seat and Will watches him with rapt attention. Underneath his button-up, the muscles in Hannibal's upper arm shift and flex. And Will watches him. Hannibal returns to a normal sitting position and places both hands on the wheel, at ten and two. And Will watches him. Hannibal glances over at Will briefly as they pull away from St. Gabriel and Will maintains eye contact until Hannibal looks away again. "Recklessness is defined as the lack of regard for consequences, yet I wish to assure you that there will be no consequences to your actions today, except for those you inflict upon yourself." Will considers this, feeling as though his life has been a long series of consequences, both inflicted upon him by the world and by himself. Hannibal continues, "Tell me, Will," he says, "will you punish yourself for this?"

Will looks from Hannibal to the window, watching the bricked houses and tall trees, twisted and barren, pass by. He contemplates Hannibal's question, likely pausing too long for it to be

natural, but Hannibal doesn't seem to mind. He doesn't interrupt Will's thoughts or demand an answer, simply waits for Will to feel truly ready to respond. And Will does, eventually. He says, "There's very little I enjoy without feeling… guilty, too. I feel bad for feeling good." Even that, he feels culpable admitting to, as though he's guilt-tripping Hannibal. Will thinks he might be manipulative. Or something worse. Something… unholy. Immoral. Vicious.

"Guilt is a self-conscious emotion, indicating a great deal of self-reflection and self-awareness." Will watches the world whirl past him out the window, and thinks about what Hannibal's said. Will is *too* self-aware, he's been told by therapists. And yet, Hannibal says it like it's a good thing. *Could it be?* Will wonders. *Does every facet of my personality have to be a negative trait?* "You are a very conscientious boy, Will," Hannibal continues. "You are moral, and kind-hearted. You are a good person." Will thinks back to Hannibal's words—what he said in response to Will's comment about the cure during that very first lunch. Hannibal had said, "*There is nothing wrong with you*." Like it was the easiest thing in the world for him to say. *You're a good person,* Will thinks to himself, trying on the phrase. *There's nothing wrong with you. You're a good person.*

Hannibal drives for a long time. The road turns from pavement to dirt and Will watches as the clusters of houses, too, turn into villas speckled throughout the forest and rolling hills. They pass by one villa with half a dozen tiny, golden-brown children running around the spacious front yard. Will closes his eyes and, though the car is nearly soundproof, he can almost hear the sounds of their small feel hitting the ground, and their laughter. Will opens his eyes and looks at Hannibal's profile, which is as beautiful as always. Will has half a mind that Hannibal was carved from marble but then, not even an artist could create something this.

The car slows to a stop and Will, as though waking up from a daze, startles slightly, looks around. They've arrived at an orchard.

Will peers out the window at the rows and rows of apple trees before Hannibal opens the door for him and Will can step out of the car, truly get a look around. The trees are green here and thick with bright, shining, red apples decorating the branches like hidden jewels. The late-Fall sun shines brightly, cheerfully down on them, making the ground dappled with light through the shadows of the leaves swaying in the gentle breeze. The ground, where the grass is a mottled green and brown, is blanketed in the bruised and battered apples, the sweet smell of their rot perfuming the air. Will looks around, taking everything in. The pale blue sky above them, the tall trees surrounding them, the rolling hills in the distance. It's all *so* beautiful. Will finds within himself a childish desire to *climb* the trees.

He expresses this to Hannibal and Hannibal smiles at him broadly, showing his teeth.

"Go ahead," Hannibal says gently. Will looks at Hannibal, whose sleeves are rolled up to his forearms and whose suit jacket is draped over his left arm (which is his version of casual, though he's still dressed completely inappropriately for a day at an apple orchard). Will thinks he looks slightly ridiculous, though he doesn't say as much. Instead, he cocks his head unsurely, wondering what Hannibal means. Is he… *encouraging* Will to climb an apple tree? Hannibal speaks again. "I will race you," he says. Then, he takes off running.

So they climb trees, eating themselves sick as they go. Will straddles a sturdy branch a few boughs above Hannibal and takes a satisfying, crisp bite of a juicy apple. There's a slight tarteness to the sweet taste, and a bitterness in the skin, and Will loves every moment of it. "Whose orchard is this?" Will calls down to Hannibal, feeling as though he's only ever asking Hannibal questions, and Hannibal's always never answering them. Hannibal says something in response but Will can't hear him, his voice too low in volume and the breeze— turned wind whipping their clothes and hair, too loud. Will tilts his body slightly, holding onto the branch for support with his free hand. "What?" Will calls out, tipping his core slightly further towards Hannibal below.

"Come down!" Hannibal calls out, his voice slightly louder.

Will leans just a little further, opens his mouth to respond, and— *falls*.

Will falls through the air for only a split second, the wind rushing in his ears, his heart thudding in his throat, branches and leaves scraping his arms and legs as he falls. Will lands hard on his back. There's a moment where it feels like he can't breathe before it comes back to him, the cool Fall air filling his lungs. Will gasps, gasps, and suddenly Hannibal is by his side.

His expression is wrecked, something Will's never seen before, completely unguarded. Hannibal looks like *he's* the fallen one, like the world is ending. "Are you alright?" he asks Will, his tone something desperate. Will nods his head, looking up at Hannibal. Hannibal's head is wreathed in halo, backlit by the sun. He looks like a handsome angel, his brow thick with worry.

"I'm fine," Will assures him, knowing Hannibal won't believe him.

Will tries to sit up to satisfy Hannibal but an abrupt wave of dizziness hits him and he falls back on his back. Hannibal catches Will's head with his hand and lowers Will slowly, gently to the ground. "You are not fine," Hannibal says softly, his tone still devastated. "You likely have a mild traumatic brain injury. We are lucky you did not fracture your spine." Will closes his eyes, the world seeming impossibly bright. He doesn't have a brain injury. He *can't*. Jesus. "I am going to run an ophthalmoscopy— to examine your eyes and determine if you are concussed," Hannibal's saying but Will barely registers his words, feeling dazed and confused.

Hannibal is shining a light in Will's eyes— where did Hannibal get a flashlight? Will blinks the light out of his eyes, trying to turn his head but there's a hand on his forehead, holding him in place and— is Hannibal straddling him now? Will tries to move but can't budge.

"Hold still," Hannibal says softly, looking focused. He's very beautiful. Will finds he no longer cares about the white light in his eyes, just cares about seeing Hannibal, his fine features, his supreme bone structure. Hannibal's grim expression looks out of place written across his face. "Your pupils are dilated," Hannibal says, sounding steely, his expression stone. "You do have a concussion, Will." Will frowns. Hannibal climbs off of him and Will

attempts to sit up again, this time hearing a ringing in his ears. His frown deepens. Hannibal stops him, slows him, guides him to a sitting position slowly. Once he's sitting, Will remembers what Hannibal told him in the car: "*There will be no consequences to your actions.*" The memory makes Will laugh out loud, and Hannibal gives him an openly concerned look. Will grins at him, but says nothing, not wanting Hannibal to blame himself.

Will walks to the car slowly, worried the world will tip over on its side if he's not careful, leaning liberally on Hannibal's arm. Once Will's seated, he feels a little better, and leans his forehead against the cool window, thankful for the chill. The car soon begins to move and the sensation lulls Will.

"Can I fall asleep?" Will asks, closing his eyes.

"No," Hannibal answers simply, and Will opens his eyes, frowning. This is going to be a long drive.

Hannibal ushers Will into his apartment quickly, wanting to get him out of the harsh sunlight. Will greatly concurs, having spent the drive there with his eyes closed, seeing the red of his eyelids and praying for shade. Once they're inside the apartment, Hannibal seems to relax marginally. He leads Will to his bedroom and says, as they go, "I would give you—" And all Will hears is *gift, gift, gift,* "the guest bedroom, but it is only my bedroom which is furnished with blackout curtains. Is the light bothering you?" Will nods his head and Hannibal rubs his hand on Will's back in a large, slow circle. The motion comforts Will greatly. Hannibal lays Will down in his school clothes in his bed and Will feels his body relax, limb by limb, cell by cell. Hannibal's mattress is firm but his duvet is deep and soft and Will sinks under the weight of it, feeling held.

"Can I fall asleep?" Will asks again, his eyes already closed.

Hannibal's voice is kind and tender when he answers, "Yes."

Hannibal wakes Will intermittently to check his pupils and ask him basic questions about the president and name of Will's school and feed him gentle foods and sips of water. Will answers them easily, and takes the food and water gratefully, feeling more like himself each time he wakes, though he's still tired. In between intervals of sleep Hannibal explains to Will that the St. Gabriel administration has been made aware of the situation and Will is excused from his classes for the next three days, and that they hope he recovers soon. Will wonders if Hannibal's charm will ever fail to buy him anything.

When Will wakes up by himself, he has no idea what time it is. The room is pitch black, but has been each time he's awoken due to the blackout curtains, meaning the fact of the darkness gives nothing away. Will sits up arduously, and makes his way over to the long, floor-to-ceiling curtains. He opens them to see below: the busy Florence night, with cars and

motorcycles passing by, illuminated by headlamps and streetlights, the lights reflecting gloriously on the wet pavement. *When did it rain?* Will wonders.

Will turns his head and notices the door on the other side of the room, leading to the rest of the apartment, has been left open by a crack. A sliver of yellow light lays across the floor, the light from the hallway to the kitchen pouring into the room. Will walks across the room slowly, his socked feet making a padded sound against the plush oriental rug. When Will opens the door, it creaks, and Will cringes, then stops. Why is he creeping around? What is he hiding from? Perhaps he doesn't want to wake Hannibal, if he is sleeping.

Hannibal is not sleeping.

He's in the kitchen, Will sees as he rounds the corner and stands in the archway between the hall and the spacious kitchen. There, Hannibal's right arm works a knife over a cutting board again and again. Will takes a step forward, into the light, and sees *what* Hannibal's cutting into.

A human arm.

Will sees, now, in this light, the blood, coating the workspace and the cutting board and Hannibal, up to his elbows. How can there be so much blood? *How can there be so much blood?* Will thinks desperately, wanting to take a step back, to turn around, to run, but frozen in his place. Will realizes his hands are shaking and his breath is coming in short. Hannibal stops in his motion and becomes eerily still. Will holds his breath. Hannibal's head *turns*. Slowly.

"Will," Hannibal says, his voice low, even, and calm. Not a question. Never a question.

Will's voice comes out a whisper. "Yes," he answers, and somehow Hannibal hears him.

"Go to bed."

There's a phone on its hook just near Will, catty corner from the doorway and if Will ran, if he lunged, he could make it. But then, Hannibal would get to him long before he could dial, much less give Hannibal's address. Then what? Would Hannibal kill him? Could Hannibal kill him? Will's not sure he wants to find out and the room is beginning to *tilt*… The floor begins to move closer to Will and Will catches himself on the wall of the hallway. He closes his eyes. He feels like vomiting. All he can see is red, red, *red.* Will uses the wall, avoiding the paintings and mirrors, to guide himself back to Hannibal's bedroom, where he shuts and locks the door.

Will wakes up the next morning to Hannibal pressing a cool washcloth to Will's head and for that Will is grateful. The sensation is wonderful and competes with the disgusting, cottony taste in Will's mouth which originates from falling asleep without brushing his teeth. Will sighs. His body aches. He sits up slowly, not wanting to strain anything, and as he does, Hannibal pulls the cloth away. Hannibal is sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed completely

in a three piece suit without the jacket, which makes Will wonder what time it is. But the curtains are drawn and the room is lit only by ornate, antique lamps, making it impossible to tell.

“How are you feeling?” Hannibal asks Will and Will considers the question.

“Better,” he decides, elongating his upper body in a luxurious stretch, which pops and crackles some of the bones in his spine and shoulders. Hannibal’s eyes track and the motion and Will tracks Hannibal’s eyes. Suddenly, a memory floods his mind. “Last night…” Will says hesitantly, feeling disturbed by his own unconscious mind. “I dreamt you were cutting up a hand in your kitchen.” Will can still feel all the panic filling his body, all the fear. He can still smell the blood. Will watches Hannibal’s face closely, not sure what he’s looking for.

“Strange dreams often occur in accordance with concussion,” Hannibal says. “Tell me, what did you do in this dream, when you found me?”

Will frowns at the duvet. He says, “I ran.”

CHAPTER IX

Will wakes up one foggy morning to the sound of his door slamming open. Gio's high, melodic voice rings out from behind an impossibly large stack of packages, varying in size and all wrapped in neat brown paper and tied in twine, as she shoulders the door open and kicks it shut behind her. "You got a package," Gio sings from behind the pile, wobbling slightly, "and another one, and another one, and another one…" she continues, trailing off.

Will sits up and throws his blanket off, rubbing his eyes. "What?" he asks meekly, not understanding what's going on.

"I don't like repeating," Gio admonishes him playfully and Will realizes what's going on, finally. He slips off the bed and rushes to help Gio catch one of the falling packages. Once everything is securely in order, Gio kneels and begins to lay the packages out on the floor and Will follows suit. Spread out, Will counts seven packages in total, each individually addressed to *'Will Graham'* in Hannibal Lecter's neat, dancing script. Gio spreads the packages so they're all visible at once, arranges them neatly, fitting them together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. They sit on opposite sides of the plot, cross-legged, and Will surveys the bounty, feeling how he imagines a normal childhood Christmas must have felt. Like the luckiest kid in the world. Will can't decide which to open first.

Gio helps with that. She points to the biggest, most box-shaped package, in contrast to the other smaller and flatter packages. She has placed the largest one in the center of the collection. Will lifts the box slowly, reverently, and sets it in his lap. He unties the twine and carefully unwraps the brown packaging paper, remembering suddenly what the packages remind him of— meat from butcher shops. Underneath the paper is a sleek black box, like a large version of the little box the cell phone Will received from Hannibal came in. Will crumples the paper and sets it at his side. "Open it, open it," Gio says excitedly, clapping her hands together. Will looks up at her and smiles, endeared. Will looks back down at the box and opens it slowly. Inside are layers of white tissue paper and Will removes them, setting the tissue paper with the crumpled brown wrapping paper. Underneath the tissue paper, and set in more tissue paper, is a pair of gleaming leather boots. Gio gasps, leaning over the spread to get a better look. Will's stomach drops. He touches one of the boots and the leather is soft against the pad of his fingers, smooth like butter, impossibly enticing, the color of black coffee. Will lets out a breath he's been holding. They are *stunning.* Will wants to put them on immediately; Will wants to send them back to where they came from without a second thought. Will cannot accept these and yet desperately wants to.

"I can't accept these," Will says softly. He looks up at Gio and her face has fallen.

"Why not?" she asks carefully. "Do you dislike them?"

Will shakes his head. "They're beautiful," he says, his voice sounding heartbroken even to his own ears. "They must have cost a fortune."

Gio develops a crease above her nose and shakes her head, her long hair shifting and shimmering in the early morning light of Will's room. "You are worth more than a fortune to Dr. Lecter," Gio says earnestly. "You must accept his gifts. Don't you understand what they mean?"

Will doesn't understand. He doesn't know what he means to Hannibal, or what Hannibal sees in him still. He *wants* so badly to matter to Hannibal, to be everything to him, to be worth all the gifts he could possibly give to Will. Will feels like a kid again, as that was the last time he can remember wanting— *needing,* someone else's approval this badly. So no, Will does not understand what the gifts mean, though he knows Hannibal, and knows Hannibal must mean *something*, always has a second meaning or implication up his tailored sleeve. But the letter Hannibal is writing in these brown paper packages is in a language Will does not speak. "Open the next one," Gio urges him gently, handing him a much smaller package, stretching over the rest of the packages once again to reach. "Don't think too much. Just open it."

So Will does. Will opens package after package, feeling better with each prize. In the end, Gio and Will sit in a pile of crumpled brown wrapping paper and twine and the gifts, which amount to: four pairs of thermal woolen socks, a red scarf, a pair of plaid wool pants, a blue dress shirt, a white dress shirt, three flannels of varying colors, two sweaters in blue and green, the pair of boots, and a thick, warm coat, which Gio insists Will try on. Will does. He stands in front of the full length mirror in his room and shrugs into it. It fits perfectly, accentuates Will's broad shoulders, and makes him feel and look more grown up. The lining, Will finds, is made of soft off-white fur. Will strokes the inside breast of the jacket.

"*Wow*," Gio whispers.

Will looks back at her and— smiles. He wants to feel worse, he thinks. And maybe he does, deep in the pit of him, that old familiar '*feeling bad for feeling good*' feeling, but mostly he feels warm, loved, and *taken care of*. Maybe it was what Gio said, about what Will means to Hannibal, but Will's preoccupation with how much the boots cost is gone. He just feels good.

"You should call him," Gio says.

Will nods his head. He should call Hannibal, at least to make sure he received everything Hannibal sent him, though Will knows even as he thinks that, that those are not his true intentions.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal says, answering after only a moment of ringing. Will smiles at the sound of his voice. Gio's left, and Hannibal's voice comes through so clear from the tiny speaker, so crisp, it's as though he's in the room with Will and they're alone together. Will looks in the mirror. He's getting hot in the jacket but it's worth it— the way it looks and feels; Will runs his hand over the fabric once more.

"Hi," Will says softly, feeling almost shy suddenly, realizing he has no idea what he wants to say. A question occurs to him. "How did you explain all the packages to the school?" All

mail goes through the front office and Will imagines Dora must've had a field day sorting through and finding package after package addressed to Will and from Hannibal Lecter. What must she think of his relationship with Hannibal? And, if the simplest and most engaging possibility is assumed to be the truth— is she so wrong?

Hannibal answers as smoothly as ever. "The St. Gabriel administration understands me to be your benefactor," he says. "Does that incite anxiety within you, Will?"

Which part? Will wonders. "The gifts or what the school thinks of us?" he says out loud. "Of our—" and Will doesn't have the word. "*Friendship*," he settles on after a pause, feeling as though even that is loaded with double entendre and implicit meaning. Answering his own question, Will says, "The gifts don't make me anxious, I guess. I felt guilty at first. Especially at first." Will thinks back to the sick-stomach feeling he got opening the pair of patent leather boots. "But then, my friend said they meant something more than what they are and that helped somehow." Will feels unbelievably unintelligible trying to explain this all out loud but forges onward, wanting to express himself, wanting to be understood. "The school, I don't care about. They could think I'm a prostitute for all it matters to me." *Butane*, that student called Will. But then, Will's never been one for what other people think of him. Will wonders if Hannibal— who seems so sure of his place in the world, who *meshes* so well with others, cares what those people think of him. He seems to be made of appearances sometimes, and keeping up with them. An assembly of mirrors, all reflecting what others want to see. Will wonders what he sees when he looks at Hannibal, if it is so contrived, and he's unsure if he wants to pull that thread. His disturbing dream resurfaces in his memory: Hannibal, at the chopping block.

"You are very strong-willed." Hannibal says, upsetting Will's unsettling train of thought. "That trait is forged in the fire of will being tested. I am all too familiar with those flames." Something in Hannibal's voice turns somber, reserved, almost secretive. "And the scars they leave us with," he says and Will hears the question without being asked: *Are you scarred, Will?*

Will is scarred. Some days he feels as though he's nothing but. "Will you come get me?" Will asks, surprising himself. It's as though his mouth has a connection to his deepest inclinations that the rest of his brain is not privy to. "I want to…" Will starts, interrogating his own desire. "Be with you," he says finally. And he does. God, he does.

As he waits for Hannibal to arrive (of course he said yes. Is there anything Will can ask of Hannibal that he'll say no to?), Will dresses in the fine clothes Hannibal bought for him, wearing the socks, pants, white button up, and deep, forest-green sweater. Will even combs his hair, feeling more like he's going on a date, as opposed to meeting with his 'benefactor'. Hannibal omitted to gift Will a pair of underwear, so Will omits wearing any underwear at all. Will's not sure what his goal is, in calling Hannibal to retrieve him, in dressing only in clothes Hannibal bought him. He wants… to be wanted, he decides.

He finds that dressed all in Hannibal's clothes, he feels like he himself belongs to Hannibal, just another possession, another rich and lavish object to be played with and manipulated.

Will stares at his reflection in the full length mirror and, glancing down, notices he's become aroused. He palms his dick through his pants and feels the rough wool against his hand, relishing the sensation. He imagines it's Hannibal there, touching him instead. He imagines what Hannibal would say to him: "*You are mine. You belong to me*."

Though Hannibal could probably call Will on the cell to alert Will of his arrival, Will opts to wait in the staff parking lot as he usually does, bundled up in the thick, warm coat Hannibal bought him and the red scarf. Will feels warm, in more ways than one. He considered masturbating to relieve some of his tension but decided against it, not wanting to be loose-limbed and content, obvious in his proclivities, when Hannibal arrived to pick him up. He was also genuinely worried Hannibal would literally smell it on him— a fear not unfounded, Will knows.

So Will is standing there, hot and itching for Hannibal, when Hannibal pulls up in the Benz. He steps out of the car and for once, he's not wearing a suit. He's dressed in slim, high-waisted gray pants, with long, pressed creases down the front of each leg, and a black high-necked sweater. The ensemble makes Hannibal look relaxed and inviting. His hair is unstuck from its usual slick style and instead hangs loosely over his forehead. He smiles at Will as he gets out of the car and the corner of his eyes crinkle and Will realizes he wants to go at Hannibal with *teeth bared*.

Will climbs into the passenger seat of the car carefully, slowly, not wanting to upset things, worries if he moves wrong he'll come undone, his head will fall off his shoulders, he'll jump Hannibal's bones, *something*.

Hannibal gets into the car and before he turns the key in the ignition, he turns and asks, very earnestly, "Are you upset with me, Will?"

Will has no words. He lunges forward.

Hannibal catches him by his upper arms, holding him steady, and they kiss. The kiss is open-mouthed and desperate, Will perhaps more desperate than Hannibal; he's *licking the back of Hannibal's teeth*. Hannibal is an excellent kisser. Will feels as though he'd forgotten, and is learning again. Hannibal's tongue probes Will's mouth gently, strokes Will's tongue, and licks Will's lips. Hannibal even bites him once, his full bottom lip, and Will actually whimpers. Hannibal's hands remain firm on Will's arms and it takes Will several moments of kissing to realize he's clutching hopelessly at Hannibal's sweater. Will wants Hannibal *so fucking badly*.

When Hannibal finally pulls away, Will wants to cry. He wants to beg, *please, please, please, don't stop, come closer, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me,* but can't bring himself to say the words, suddenly feeling impossibly shy. He wants to hide his face in Hannibal's shoulder, but Hannibal still has an unyielding grip on Will's arms, holding him in place. Will settles for ducking his head. His face feels hot and his underarms prickle with beads of sweat. He realizes his breath is coming in short. He feels fucking unhinged.

“There is no rush,” Hannibal says softly, clearly meaning it. Will lets out an inhuman whine without his own permission. The sound makes him want to die but, risking a glance up at Hannibal, Will infers that Hannibal enjoys it, as he smiles forgivingly at Will. “And you are not doing anything wrong. Your enthusiasm is very flattering.” Will cringes. He doesn’t want to be *flattering*. He wants to be wanted as deeply as he wants. Hannibal’s grip on his arms eases and Will pushes forward, knocking his head gently against Hannibal’s sternum, the soft leather center console pressing mildly into his stomach. Hannibal’s hand comes up to hold the back of Will’s neck, cupping the base of his skull. Will feels so held, and still he wants more.

“I think I’m crazy about you,” Will says under his breath, almost wanting to not be heard at all, hating how young and clichéd he sounds. “And I want you to be crazy about me too.”

Hannibal runs his hand further up the back of Will’s head, tangling his fingers in Will’s hair, scritching his scalp, before tugging slightly at his curls. The tug becomes a pull and Will lets his head be lifted back, until he’s almost eye-level with Hannibal. Hannibal looks deep into his eyes, as though he can see inside, into Will’s brain, and Will looks right back. Hannibal’s eyes are as dark and murky as ever and Will wants Hannibal to look at him forever. Hannibal takes his free hand and, holding Will in place by the hair, places his thumb on Will’s bottom lip and forces his mouth to open slightly. Then he kisses Will.

He kisses Will harshly, biting and licking until Will is panting into his mouth, writhing in his seat, clinging to Hannibal’s sleeves with both hands. Hannibal eventually pulls Will’s head back slightly by his hair, and pulls his own self away as well. Will blinks a few times, trying to shake off the staggering effect of the kiss. Hannibal searches his face. “I apologize,” Hannibal says quietly. “I have been… holding back.” Will leans forward slightly and brushes his nose with Hannibal’s, obsessed with the way it feels to touch him so gently. Hannibal continues, his voice barely above a whisper, “I thought it would be better for you if I kept myself on a rather short leash,” he says. Will kisses him.

Will kisses him harder and deeper until he can’t hold himself back anymore, until he climbs over the center console and into Hannibal’s lap.

Hannibal, impressively, takes this in stride, placing one hand on Will’s hip and the other on his waist. Will begins an awkward, cramped grind in Hannibal’s lap, having some trouble keeping rhythm but feeling too good to care, feeling Hannibal’s hard cock between the layers of their clothes pressed against him. Will grinds down and, pulling away from Hannibal’s mouth, watches Hannibal’s blissful expression as he lets out a small gasp. “You feel so good,” Will manages to murmur, wishing he had better words for it. ‘*Good*’ is about the understatement of the year.

Hannibal seems to understand though, as his grip on Will tightens and he pushes up against him, thrusting as though he’s fucking him right there, in the Benz, and Will can’t help it: he lets out a wanton moan. He leans back, bringing his hands to Hannibal’s shoulders and thrusting his cock against Hannibal’s stomach, and lays his back on the horn.

The sound is loud and piercing and Will startles, jerking in Hannibal’s lap. Hannibal seems unphased, simply pulls Will in and away from the steering wheel. Will can’t help it, he giggles. Then, he stops laughing, thinking suddenly, rattled, of one of the St. Gabriel staff

coming out to the parking lot to see if something's wrong and finding them in this rather compromising position. *God forbid it be Dora,* Will thinks, horrified. Will looks at Hannibal, who is watching him closely. Will decides he wants to be spread out on Hannibal's bed and taken apart piece by piece. He leans in and, in Hannibal's ear, whispers, "Take me home."

CHAPTER X

Chapter Notes

Warning for the allusion to sexual trauma.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as they're through the door, Will is at Hannibal again, having to stand on his tiptoes to reach his mouth when they're not seated. Will bites Hannibal's tongue in his fury and Hannibal *hisses*. Will presses his body flush to Hannibal's, wanting more, more, more. He begins tearing at Hannibal's clothes, untucking his sweater and nearly ripping the buttons of his fly. Hannibal grabs Will's wrists to stop him, gripping him firmly, pinning Will's hands to his sides. "*Slow*," Hannibal says softly, clearly, his lisp on the 's' and accent on the 'l' making the word sound thick and alluring. Will wants to eat the word out of Hannibal's mouth. He strains forward, wanting to kiss Hannibal again, but Hannibal stops him with a hand at the base of his throat, not choking him by any means but enough pressure to nip Will's attempt in the bud. Will finally stills, takes a deep breath in, realizing how heavily he's panting. He wants to go slow— he wants to do whatever Hannibal wants. So he relaxes his body marginally, stops pressing his throat so severely against Hannibal's grip on his neck, and seems to please Hannibal, as Hannibal smiles his not-quite-there smile. He releases Will's neck and begins to stroke Will's cheek. "Good," Hannibal says and all Will hears is the unspoken, "*Good boy*."

Hannibal drops his hand to hold Will's and the gesture is so starkly tender and mild, it surprises Will. Hannibal then turns, and leads Will through the entryway, past the dining and living room and through the kitchen, down the hall, and into his bedroom. Inside, the curtains are closed and the room is a deep, pitch black. Hannibal releases Will's hand and Will remains in the doorway, nervous to venture deeper into the room, as he has the layout memorized but not in a manner that would be helpful to navigating the room in the dark. Hannibal traverses through the room with ease, turning on lamps as he goes. The lighting, once all the lamps are on, is low and intimate and, once he can see, Will's eyes are immediately drawn to the standing mirror across from Hannibal's large bed. Hannibal tracks Will's gaze.

From the other side of the room, closer to the mirror, Hannibal says, "Come here."

Will complies and, once they're near, Hannibal takes Will in his arms. Hannibal runs his hands up and down Will's arms, creating pleasant sensory input and Will shivers, closing his eyes, relishing it despite the fact that he can feel the pressure only through the layers of his clothes. After a moment of this, Hannibal stops in the motion and turns Will to face a different direction, walking him a few steps forward as Will opens his eyes and sees that he's now in front of the mirror. He looks down at his feet quickly, wanting to avoid his own indecent expression, his own reddened face. He looks at the boots Hannibal bought him,

which he has yet to take off. He's still in the winter coat as well, and wearing the scarf. All bundled up. "Take them off," Hannibal says in a low voice.

Will's head snaps up and he catches Hannibal's eye in the mirror. "What?" Will asks, having a good idea already of what Hannibal means but half-afraid to hope for it.

"Take off the boots," Hannibal says firmly, graciously confirming Will's prognosis.

Will notes that Hannibal says '*the* boots' and not '*your* boots', as if the boots don't belong to Will at all. Just gifts, just things Hannibal has bought that Will has been permitted to use—and Will hopes that is what it is. Permission. He kneels down and, with Hannibal standing over him, surveilling, unknots the laces, loosens them, and removes the boots. He stands, kicking them to the side, and looks at Hannibal for further instruction, wanting it dearly.

"Now, the scarf," Hannibal orders. Will maintains eye contact with Hannibal in the mirror as he unwinds the scarf from around his neck, slowly, ever so slowly. "The jacket." Will begins to shrug off the jacket and Hannibal assists him, holding the neckline of the jacket as Will removes his arms from the sleeves. Once it's off, Hannibal folds the jacket in half and drapes it over the chaise longue at the foot of his bed. Will's hands itch to pull off the sweater, undo his pants' fly, but he waits, waits for Hannibal to tell him what to do. Hannibal returns to his position standing behind Will, looming over him. "Remove your sweater," Hannibal says with a jerk of his chin, fulfilling Will's wishes like he can read his mind. Will pulls his sweater off by the back of the collar. So there Will stands, in his button up and trousers and thick wool socks. There's truly nothing obscene about the picture except for the barely-there outline of his arousal, but still Will still feels like something raw and exposed, pinned under Hannibal's gaze like a butterfly. Hannibal places a hand on each of Will's shoulders. "Unbutton your shirt," he says, his voice mellow and muted. Will does, unbuttoning in a trail from his throat to his lower abdomen, fumbling a few times but standing there, eventually, with the shirt open and his chest and stomach bared. Hannibal reaches around Will, placing a hand on Will's sternum, and strokes the length of his torso. Will watches this all in reflection and begins to tremble. Hannibal does not acknowledge this, just runs his fingers ever so softly along the length of Will's mid-section. The motion feels filthy and Will has to close his eyes, can't take it, can't take it. "Open your eyes," Hannibal orders immediately and Will nearly whimpers. "Look at yourself." And Will does. "You are so—" *dirty*, Will thinks. "Beautiful," Hannibal says. Will can't help himself; he takes off his shirt without being told to and Hannibal clicks his tongue. He takes the shirt from Will and drapes it (carefully so it won't wrinkle, Will assumes), along with the jacket, on the chaise longue. "Do you wish to do this on your own?" Hannibal asks him. "I can leave you unattended." Will shakes his head sincerely and Hannibal rewards him with another smile. He leans over Will's shoulder and so, so softly, brushes his lips against the junction of Will's neck and shoulder. Will makes a sound something like a bleat, unable to stop himself, and Hannibal bites him. Then, Hannibal pulls away, and catches Will's eye once again in the mirror. "Undo the fly of your trousers," Hannibal says. Will does so, the tip of cock peeking out of his pants once they're all the way undone. The head is shiny and red and Will feels helplessly embarrassed, but doesn't break eye contact with Hannibal.

Will manages to say, "I've been…" he feels breathless, "*thinking* about this mirror." *Fantasizing*, is the word he should've used, as it's more honest. But he can't bring himself to

say it out loud.

“Tell me,” Hannibal commands, his hand creeping down the trail of hair along Will’s abdomen. Will gasps. He shifts his weight from one foot to the other, needing badly for Hanibal to take him in hand, stroke him, make him come. But Hannibal doesn’t. He pauses in his trek towards Will’s pelvis, clearly waiting for Will to answer.

“I want to watch you fuck me,” Will admits quietly.

Hannibal plunges his hand down the front of Will’s pants and grasps him firmly, begins a steady and unforgiving rhythm on his cock, working him over and over. Will whines and writhes slightly, leaning his weight against Hannibal, pressing his back to Hannibal’s chest. Hannibal’s hand on him feels incredible, unbelievable, unreal. Will pushes against Hannibal’s hand, thrusting into his grip, needing it tighter, faster, harder. Precum leaks from the tip of his cock and coats Hannibal’s palm as he moves, making the motion slick and easy. Hannibal slows to a stop, runs his fingers along the vein on the underside of Will’s cock, and presses his nose against Will’s neck, smelling him. Scenting him. “Remove your socks and trousers,” Hannibal says smoothly, his heart beating steadily against Will’s back, even-paced.

Will pulls the waistband of his pants down, bending over to step out of them and tug off the socks and when he does, he looks up quickly, seeing himself in the mirror, bent over in front of Hannibal. He watches the way Hannibal holds his waist confidently, pulls Will’s rear towards him slightly, thrusts casually against him. Will keens, standing again, now completely naked. He looks like a fucking *sight*, in front of a fully-clothed Hannibal, who has not a hair out of place, who wears a relaxed smile, who’s touching Will all over, running his hand over Will’s arms and waist, down his back, grabbing his ass, working Will’s cock with his other hand.

Will’s legs begin to give out and Hannibal catches Will with his arm like an iron band around Will’s waist, holding Will against his body. Hannibal strokes him slowly, smoothly, the palm of his hand now wet with precum and rough with artists’ callouses. “So good,” Hannibal murmurs in Will’s ear. “You are doing so good.” *Good boy*, Will thinks like a chant, *good boy, good boy, good boy*. Oh, how desperately he wants to be called that by Hannibal. Oh, how unable he is to plead for it.

“Can we go to bed?” Will is able to ask, his whole body shaking.

Hannibal releases Will from his grasp and, with hands on his lower back and shoulder, leads Will to the bed. The cool, plush duvet feels like relief against Will’s skin and Will sighs. He stretches out his limbs, which shake still. Hannibal climbs onto bed, crawling over Will and pinning him down, crouching over him like a predator about to eat its prey. Will strains his neck up to reach Hannibal, and Hannibal kisses him. The kiss is deep and open-mouthed and, as it happens, Hannibal releases his hold on Will’s wrists, resumes in touching him, working his cock over and over again, until Will cries out into Hannibal’s mouth. Hannibal pulls his mouth away, quickens his pace on Will’s cock, and searches Will’s face. Finally, his breath comes in shorter than usual, though it’s still nothing compared to Will’s desperate, unhinged panting.

Will feels himself getting close as Hannibal strokes his cock at a rapid, punishing pace. He's making all kinds of noise, loud and embarrassing, as he thrusts into Hannibal's hand. He thinks he's talking, too. Something like, "Please, please, please, harder, Hannibal, *Hannibal*," again and again. Hannibal leans his head down until his lips touch Will's ear.

"You sound incredible," Hannibal says in his ear, "my dear boy. What do you want? Tell me what you want. I will give you anything— do *anything*, for you. All for you, Will."

Will moans at the sound of Hannibal's voice. "I want—" Will says, almost unable to talk. "Can I— Can I touch you? I want to touch you," Will manages. Hannibal seems surprised by this, and he pulls away once again, his gaze going blank and eerie for a moment. Will takes a deep breath in and lets it out slowly. It occurs to him, through his murky and muddled, anguished thoughts, that Hannibal's lack of immediate accord may have to do with… whatever's happened to him. Whatever the world has done to him. His scars.

"Yes," Hannibal says finally, his voice hushed. "But—" Hannibal hesitates uncharacteristically, as though at a loss for what to say. "Please, go slowly," he says and Will's heart *aches*. Will nods his head in assent.

Will's really too much shorter than Hannibal for the mechanics of this to work with Hannibal on top so Will pushes against Hannibal's left shoulder with his right hand gently and says, "On your back." He registers for the first time how rough and raspy his voice has become. He sounds wrecked already. Hannibal rolls over onto his back, and the bed is so wide he can do this without Will moving over to accommodate him. Will then clambers on top of Hannibal, sitting on the meat of Hannibal's thighs. He undoes Hannibal's button-fly and, through the slit in Hannibal's underwear, pulls out Hannibal's cock. It's long, bigger than Will's by a decent amount, and as pale as the rest of Hannibal, with color only in the red tip. It's the first penis Will's seen other than his own, and Will feels glad it's Hannibal, and not anyone else. He wants Hannibal to be his first everything.

Will begins to stroke Hannibal at a slow, uneven pace, trying to replicate what Hannibal did to him on Hannibal's own cock. Will can't decide whether he's more interested in watching Hannibal's cock, which looks so large in Will's comparatively petite hand, or Hannibal's face, which seems unguarded, yet not over-reactive. A series of microexpressions flit over Hannibal's face in rapid succession and Will catalogs each one, feeling as though he can read Hannibal for the first time since their meeting. On Hannibal's face he sees fear, pleasure, adoration, pain, remembrance, and combinations of the five as Hannibal's breath begins to come in shorter and shorter, as his chest rising and sinking rapidly, as his eyes fall closed.

"Can I use my mouth?" Will asks and Hannibal blinks his eyes open. He sits up on his elbow and looks at Will head-on. Hannibal nods his head steadily.

Will moves further down the bed, settling between Hannibal's legs, maintaining eye contact with Hannibal as much as he can. Will lays on his stomach, able to stretch out fully while just barely brushing the foot of the bed frame. He lays one hand on Hannibal's clothed thigh and takes Hannibal's cock with the other. He closes his eyes, begins by open-mouthed kissing the tip, tasting the salty flavor there and enjoying it more than he thought he would. Hannibal gasps. Will's gaze flickers upward, and he locks eyes with Hannibal, takes Hannibal's cock in his mouth, and sucks. Hannibal's hand raises, as though he's going to grab Will's hair, but he

quickly redirects to grab the sheets near Will's head. Will slides his mouth lower down, taking more of Hannibal's cock, wishing he could take it all at once, down his fucking throat, wanting it.

Hannibal lifts his other hand, which had been laying across his stomach, and begins to stroke Will's face gently. Will tongues the underside of Hannibal's cock and wishes Hannibal would pull his hair, hit him, fuck his face, God, Jesus Christ, *please*, Will thinks. He feels cared for, still. He wants to feel used.

Finally, Hannibal moves his hand to cup the base of Will's skull, encouraging him to bob his head. Hannibal's hold on Will's head relaxes and Will pulls off Hannibal's cock with a wet sound. "Can you—" Will starts and fuck, his voice already sounds fucking ruined. He must look ruined, too. "You can pull my hair," Will says, feeling like he sounds unbelievably stupid but wanting Hannibal to do it so badly, it's worth it. "If you want," Will thinks to add.

Hannibal nods again and Will returns to his task. Hannibal fists Will's hair, pulling it slightly at first, then harder. Will moans around Hannibal's cock and it must feel good because Hannibal lets out a harsh breath and pulls Will's hair again. Will loves it, loves how it feels, but it's still not enough. He wants Hannibal to fuck his throat raw, take him over, use him up.

Will sucks harder, swirls his tongue around the head of Hannibal's cock, grips his thigh, hoping to encourage Hannibal to abuse him, but obviously Hannibal does not. Hannibal treats him gently, does not fuck up into his mouth, does not push his head down. With the exception of pulling his hair per Will's request, Hannibal lays there like a perfect gentleman, like someone unused to receiving oral sex, who fears crossing some unseen line. Will wants all the lines to be crossed. He wants Hannibal to be his first and only everything, to ruin him, ruin him, ruin him. Hannibal pulls his hair harder, distracting Will, and Will moans again. Hannibal pulls even harder, hurting him, and Will loves it, but then realizes, as Hannibal uses his other hand to push Will's shoulder, that Hannibal's warning him. Will bats Hannibal's hands away, wanting Hannibal to come down his throat.

Hannibal does.

The flavor, Will barely notices. He swallows around Hannibal's cock a few times, wanting all of it, until Hannibal begins pushing at his shoulder again. Will pulls away, finally, wiping his mouth and sitting on his heels. To Will's delight, he sees that Hannibal is gasping for air, moving to hold himself up on his elbows again. "If only…" Hannibal says, running a hand through his hair, disturbing it slightly in an impossibly attractive manner. Hannibal looks up at Will darkly. "If only you could see yourself in this moment, Will," he says.

Will twists his upper body to look at himself in the mirror behind him and sees the mess he is. Pink, ruddy cheeks, swollen, red, spit-slick lips, and heavy-lidded eyes. He looks smutty and slightly used. He still wants more. *Why can't this be enough?* Will wonders, looking back at Hannibal.

Hannibal's expression is painted with concern. "Tell me what is wrong," Hannibal says.

Will turns to look at the blackout curtains, wishing he could see outside the window but knowing he couldn't without the rest of the world being able to look in. He looks back at

Hannibal, not making eye contact this time, just looking at the perimeter of Hannibal's face as he speaks. "You're holding back," Will says, his voice coming out flat, even to his own ears. "You're treating me with… kid gloves," he says, then cringes. It sounds so harsh, so mean, so ungrateful. Can't this be enough for Will? Will he always want more?

"I apologize," Hannibal says immediately, "for making you feel that way." There's a loaded pause. Will looks down at his lap, blushes at his valiantly hard cock, looks quickly to one of the ornate lamps near Hannibal's bedside. Depicted in the stained glass is a lamb, galloping over pink flowers, set into a jade-green background. "Are you sure of what you want?" Hannibal asks Will, snapping him out of his reverie.

Will looks at his hands, resting on his own thighs, and snorts. "You're asking me that now?" Will asks, looking back up at Hannibal, into his eyes this time.

"We can do," Hannibal says, not addressing Will's rhetorical question, "whatever you want."

I want you to hurt me, Will thinks bitterly, unsure how to say it, ashamed for wanting it at all. But he does. God, he does. He wants Hannibal to take him apart, piece by fucking piece.

Chapter End Notes

I fear it will be a short while til the next update as I am drowning in assignments and birthday parties (happy Aries season, everyone). Hope this update will tide you all over! I very much enjoyed writing it.

CHAPTER XI

Chapter Notes

> Posting this as a reward for finishing my homework. Hope y'all enjoy! Also the sailing mechanics are a composite of lots and lots of beginner's sailing guides and also some fudging-- I apologize for any mistakes.

One Saturday morning, in mid-November, the wind whips Will and Gio's hair as they walk back from a local café and the birds sing goodbye songs before migrating and the leaves rustle almost violently in the trees and Will pulls his scarf tighter around his neck, tucking the ends into his buttoned up coat. Gio holds onto his arm as they walk, close by him, pointing out interesting houses, making up stories about the people who live inside them. Will laughs at the comical stories, which make up most of them, and bumps her shoulder with his when the stories take a particularly sentimental turn. Will doesn't bother pointing out the truths of people's lives, because he doesn't know how he knows, and he feels as though sharing his— well, Hannibal would call it a '*gift*' but Will thinks of it as a *condition*, with Gio is inappropriate, despite the fact that she's seen it in action before. Maybe it's because when Will has control, he wishes to assert that control in order to restrain himself.

The front entrance of St. Gabriel is technically the chapel, but the main roads all lead to the front office and the staff parking lot, meaning Gio and Will, taking the main road into town back, see Hannibal's Benz once they're in sight of the school. Gio playfully bats Will's arm, and tilts her head closer to his. "He's here," she says conspiratorially. Will *giggles*, a sound he didn't know he could make. He covers his face with a cold, pink hand, slipping the other into Gio's. She grips his hand tightly, squeezing it. Hannibal steps out of the Benz and turns, waves to them. "He's cute," Gio says. "I always forget how cute he is." Will laughs again. '*Cute*' is not a word he would ever use to describe Hannibal Lecter, and he's not sure anyone's ever used it to describe him before this moment.

Will and Gio approach the Benz smiling. Hannibal's eyes pass politely over Gio's face but quickly land on Will, clearly drinking the sight of him in. Will smiles, looks to the side, then looks back at Hannibal, wanting, too, to drink him in. Will notes Hannibal's strange attire; casual trousers and a thin, almost blouse-like white button down, which he wears loose around the collar. Will also registers his odd choice of shoes— deck shoes.

"Hello," Hannibal says. "*Ciao*," he nods to Gio. "I had arranged a surprise for Will, today," he begins apologetically. "But things can always be rearranged." His smile is charming, and unnerves Will somehow.

"We have no more plans for the day," Gio says cheerfully. "He's all yours," she adds, all but winking at Hannibal.

Hannibal nods graciously and Will makes his way around the car, to the passenger's side door. Hannibal follows suit and opens the door for him as usual. The ritual is familiar to Will by now, not so strange, but something about Hannibal is *off*. Perhaps he's smiling a degree too much, or moving slightly mechanically. Will can't tell, but whatever it is fills him with a sense of dread. He climbs into the passenger's seat. Hannibal slides into the driver's seat beside him and starts the car.

"So," Will begins, feeling somewhat desperate for something to say, "what's the surprise?" he asks.

Hannibal shakes his head, smiles, perfectly pleasant. He says, "If I told you, it would not be a surprise, my dear Will." And it's the way he says '*dear*', that Will knows certainly that something is wrong. But *what*? Maybe it was what Will said the last time they saw each other, that Hannibal was holding back, too gentle with him. Maybe Will's fucked everything up. He stares at Hannibal's profile, trying to read Hannibal's mind the way Hannibal seems to be able to read his. After a long moment, Hannibal speaks. "I do not wish to intrude," he says, "but I must ask you. Your companion— is she a romantic partner?" And Will understands.

He shakes his head emphatically. "No," Will says. "No, she's a—" and Will gets caught between 'friend' and 'lesbian', feeling neither adequately explain why Gio is so clearly *not* a romantic interest in Will's life. "It's not like that," Will says finally. There's another pause as Will struggles to express himself fully. Eventually, he says, "You're it for me, Hannibal," and he means it. Hannibal has become Will's everything— is more than everything to him. Maybe Will is not as strong-willed as Hannibal thinks him to be, maybe he is yellow-bellied and malleable, but he finds he doesn't care. He just wants to be held by Hannibal, to be forgiven by him for a transgression that didn't even occur. He wants Hannibal to take care of him, to hurt him, to do anything and everything he wants. "You're it," Will says softly.

Hannibal says nothing for a moment. Adjusts his grip on the steering wheel. Finally, he speaks. "I did not consider myself a jealous person before I met you. Some describe jealousy as a… *burning* sensation, deep within them. A physical pain brought on by emotional pain." he says and Will leans back in the car seat, listening closely. "As a child I would entertain myself by imagining my heart as a room. The center of me, the place where all the things I held dear lived," he continues. "My sister, Mischa, and I played the game together, describing our 'heartrooms'. A stuffed rabbit here, a music box there." Will is surprised— Hannibal's never mentioned a sister before. Will knows without asking that whatever fate she suffered, it was unspeakable. Will imagines that the only place Hannibal can visit Mischa now, is his heartroom. "When I saw the girl clinging to you," Hannibal continues, "it felt as though my heartroom was burning, with everything inside." Will feels guilt like a knife in the gut.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

Hannibal shakes his head. "I do not wish to hurt you, Will, by hurting," he says. "But then, pain is a prickly beast, bringing everything down with it."

"She really isn't—" Will starts but stops himself. '*She*' is not the issue, Will knows without being told. "Thank you for telling me this," Will says instead. And he means it. Even Hannibal's hurt, he wants to be a part of it, he feels grateful to be a part of.

“Thank you, Will,” Hannibal says, and Will’s not sure what Hannibal’s thanking him for.

The rest of the drive is more comfortable after that, some of the tension relieved. Will keeps track of the time and the drive is two hours in total; Will knows they’re headed for the coast long before they reach it. He begins buzzing in his seat once they turn onto the E80 and doesn’t stop until they hit the ocean. “What are we doing here?” Will asks, though he has a pretty good idea. Hannibal doesn’t answer, just gives Will a knowing smile, and parks the car in a parking garage near the pier. He opens Will’s door for him and, as though he’s some kind of celebrity or heiress, Hannibal holds his hand out for Will to take, helping him out of the car. Will smiles up at Hannibal as he gets out, pleased to be treated like a luxury, embarrassed slightly, and somehow pleased at his own embarrassment. Hannibal seems to shine down on him like the sun.

Hannibal walks with Will to the pier and, as they go, if they are headed where Will thinks they’re headed, Will notes that the weather isn’t ideal for it, but he looks forward to it anyways. Whatever the weather is, Will will make it work to their advantage. His walk is ridiculously enthusiastic and jaunty, he knows, but he can’t help it; he’s so *excited* . He can’t remember the last time he looked forward to something this much. He wishes he could hold Hannibal’s hand as they walk, like lovers in movies and television do.

“Tell me, how did you know where I was taking you,” Hannibal asks, “before we reached a 100 kilometer radius?”

“I’ve seen maps of Italy before,” Will answers easily, looking at the waves in the distance. When he looks at Hannibal, his expression is amused. Will’s brain catches up to his mouth and he realizes how better to explain it to Hannibal. “I have an eidetic memory,” Will says. “Most of the routes to the coast, or surrounding Montaione, I memorized.”

“Remarkable,” Hannibal says under his breath, as though he doesn’t mean for Will to hear, though perhaps Will can’t tell what is and isn’t meant for him anymore. “Eidetic,” Hannibal begins at a normal volume, “comes from the Greek word ‘eidos’, meaning form, in contrast to ‘ethos’ meaning character.” He gives Will one of his open, curious looks. “Do you find your form contrasts your character?” he asks.

Will says, “I find most others find that.” Will pictures himself, as though if he does so hard enough, he’ll be able to see what other people see when they look at him. If Hannibal is a stack of mirrors— what is Will? A funhouse reflection of people’s rawest, truest emotions, perhaps. People do not enjoy being encountered with their rawest, truest emotions. “People are… displeased by my character,” Will says eventually.

“But not by your form,” Hannibal infers slyly, looking pleased.

“My character overtakes my form,” Will argues. Hannibal opens his mouth to respond but both of their attention is quickly drawn away by their arrival to their destination: the pier. Brightly colored boats bob in the ocean, white caps licking their hulls, their masts so tall they seem to pierce the clouded sky. Strong, sun-beaten men and women move from the docks to

the boats and back, shouting instructions and information to each other as they go. Children hang off parents from the pier, pointing to the tallest, biggest ships, begging to get a closer look. Will watches it all with compulsive passion, feeling, for the first time since very young childhood, at home. He tamps down the urge to run towards the first boat he sees and clamber aboard, instead opting to brush the back of his hand against the back of Hannibal's, catching his attention. "This is my surprise?" Will asks, supremely pleased.

Hannibal smiles one of his barely-there smiles, making the corners of his eyes crinkle slightly, a strange feature on the face of someone so young but charming all the same. "Yes, Will," Hannibal says and Will feels something in his chest he's never felt before. Like flowers blooming. Like choking on the petals. "This is your surprise." Hannibal points to one of the mid-sized keelboats, a red and white affair, moored to the dock nearby. "That one is yours," Hannibal says.

Will doesn't understand. "Mine?"

Hannibal looks at him with an overtly fond gaze. He says, "It is in your name."

"Will," Hannibal says, gesturing towards the scarred, weathered old man in front of them, "this is Ermenegildo. He will be assisting us today." Will looks up from his task of carefully rolling up his sleeves. Ermenegildo's skin is a deep brown and his hair stark white, creating a strange, striking contrast and evidence of a great deal of time spent in the sun. Will forces a smile in Ermenegildo's direction. Ermenegildo does not smile in return, instead grunts roughly, which comforts Will somehow. He decides that Ermenegildo reminds him very much of the sailors Will knew in Louisiana, when he was very young, who would grumble about Will's age but allow him to fix their boat motors anyhow. "He has sailed much of the Thyrrhenian and Mediterranean seas, and I would trust no one else to aid in our journey," Hannibal says, smiling warmly.

Will nods, and they board the boat.

Hannibal climbs on with some stumbling, looking slightly ridiculous in the life-jacket, but Will is sure to catch him, feeling like, for the first time since their meeting, Will is the one holding all the cards. He feels an inkling of anxiety at the responsibility at hand and is grateful Hannibal brought someone experienced to help them, though a deeper, more private part of Will's inner machinations wishes it were him and Hannibal alone together.

Ermenegildo gives Will and Hannibal a tour of the boat before they set sail, showing them the deck, the cockpit, the tiny cabin, which is taken up mostly by a dusty stack of mattresses, and explaining to Hannibal all the moving pieces, such as the mast and boom, and the lifelines. Hannibal seems fascinated by the sail, watching it billow and luff in the wind as Ermenegildo lets it out, and Will feels fascinated by Hannibal. Watching him take in the information, clearly processing it and tucking it away somewhere in his mind, never to be forgotten, is incredible.

“Where’s our destination?” Will asks as he and Ermenegildo unmoor the boat and prepare the lifelines while Hannibal watches over them from the deck.

Will turns to look at Hannibal after a moment of quiet and Hannibal’s giving him this enigmatic smile. It says, ‘*Anywhere you want.*’ Will shakes his head, and turns to Ermenegildo.

Ermenegildo points Northwest, to a tiny island in the distance. He says simply, his voice gruff, “Elba.”

The wind blows harshly, leeward for the most part, meaning Will mans the boom diligently as Ermenegildo steers the rudder, though Will takes breaks often to adjust the sheets, wanting to trim the sails carefully, showing off slightly for Hannibal’s benefit. Hannibal clearly appreciates this, watching him closely, eyes lingering on his arms, torso, face. Will blushes slightly under Hannibal’s gaze though he manages to blame some of it, in his own head, on the biting wind coloring his cheeks. If Ermenegildo minds, or even notices, he says nothing. He simply stays at the wheel, steering the rudder in a steady rhythm against Will’s work on the sail. Will keeps track of the wind by looking at the waves around them, caught between that and Hannibal, constantly getting distracted by the very person he’s intent on impressing with his focus and skill. But Will manages.

Eventually, Hannibal asks “May I operate the boom?” in his usual polite tone, which is so incongruous with the setting, but endears Will to him all the same. Will feels his heart threaten to beat out his chest and that strange blooming sensation again. He must be smiling like a moron at Hannibal but he can’t help it, he’s so content. The wind whips Hannibal’s hair around his face, disrupting it tremendously, and the thick orange life-jacket looks so out of place on him, as do the rubber-soled shoes; Will can feel himself falling deeply into something great, headfirst.

Will grins a little wider. “Of course,” he tells Hannibal. “Of course.”

So Hannibal grabs the boom with both hands and asks, over the sound of the wind and the waves, “Which direction?”

Will peers overboard and takes a look at the waves, feels the wind on his face. “Towards me,” he says, beckoning Hannibal closer. Hannibal, on the other side of the boom, pushes it towards Will slightly, and the sail shifts, the wind catching it in just the right way to continue to propel the boat forward, towards Elba. Will watches Hannibal’s strong arms work, the muscles in his biceps bulging under his button down, which is now wet and clinging to him with mist, nearly see-through. Hannibal looks up and him and Will realizes his mouth is open. He closes it.

After they establish a rhythm, and Hannibal seems more comfortable adjusting as the wind changes, Will turns to the sheets, pulling them in slightly, trimming the sails as Hannibal and Ermenegildo steer towards Elba.

Will senses something's wrong before he registers what it is.

The wind has changed drastically, and by the time Will's cognizant of it, turning his head towards Hannibal to instruct him, he sees that Hannibal's already moving in the wrong direction. "No!" Will shouts, moving quickly, slipping slightly on the wet deck. Will catches his balance and registers completely that Hannibal is steering into the wind, close-hauling the point of sail. Water rushes from the starboard side of the boat, soaking Will up to his knees. The boat's going to *tip*. Ermenegildo rushes towards the mainsheet, hauling it to the cockpit, while Will moves port, opposing the heeling side of the boat, trying to impose some balance on the small vessel. If their keel was bigger it would balance itself but, as a small boat, their chances of tipping over are dismal. Hannibal looks half-panicked, a strange and frightening expression on his face. "Keep it centerline!" Will shouts over the commotion, trying to make his voice as loud and calm as possible at once, combating his own internal racing heart. Hannibal seems to receive this well, and does so deftly. *We'll be fine,* Will tells himself as Hannibal and Ermenegildo steer the boat out of the wind and Will crouches port, trying to keep his center of gravity low to the deck. *Even if we heel, we'll be fine. We're all in life jackets, there are other boats nearby, everything is okay.* Will's heart pounds in his chest. *Your name is Will Graham*, Will tells himself sternly. *You are in the Thyrrenian sea, some ten nautical miles from mainland Italy.* Will checks his waterproof watch. *It is 2:17 in the afternoon. Your name is Will Graham.*

The boat steadies slightly, no longer on the verge of tipping over.

"I am…very sorry." Hannibal calls to Will, moving away from the boom and towards the cockpit.

Will shakes his head as he moves towards the boom, adjusting it in time with Ermenegildo's trimming of the sheets, his heart still thudding away in his chest. "I shouldn't have left you," Will says, feeling like an idiot for doing so. It took him weeks to be able to successfully calculate the direction of the wind, and move the boom accordingly. He should've known that, even being a quick learner, it was a possibility that Hannibal would become disoriented by the shifting wind direction. Ermenegildo returns to the wheel and he and Will begin moving in time together, as though synchronized, keeping the boat steady and moving the point of sail to close reach. Will calls out, "I'm really sorry. It's not your fault."

"Perhaps it is healthy for me to feel embarrassment," Hannibal says. Will looks at Hannibal briefly, to see that his expression is uncharacteristically sheepish, his face a little pink, his eyes wide. He looks suddenly young, suddenly *his age*. Will feels his chest swell. "It has been some time," Hannibal admits.

At this admission, this little vulnerability, Will feels overcome with desire. He needs Hannibal desperately, immediately. Perhaps it's leftover adrenaline, but Will doesn't care, he doesn't *care.* His heart beats in his chest like a drum and his head fills with all kinds of plainly hazardous suggestions of Hannibal fucking him right there, bending him over the guard rail or laying him out on the wet deck. Will shakes the images from his mind. Completely unrealistic. The cabin, however…

Will locks eyes with Hannibal and jerks his head towards the cabin. Will doesn't wait to make sure Hannibal's following him; he makes his way to the cabin quickly, suddenly

remembering that he's yet to see Hannibal naked— the closest thing being this moment, seeing Hannibal in the nearly see-through button down. Will shoulders the door to the cabin open, trusting blindly Ermenegildo to man the entire boat by himself. *It's a small boat,* Will rationalizes inside his head. *I was manning boats this size at 15. It will be fine.* Will begins stripping the moment he's inside the cabin, not wanting to waste any time, nevermind how much enjoyed being undressed (or, undressing *himself* at Hannibal's behest, rather) tortuously slowly before. The door is mostly closed, though not latched, not that Will cares. Ermenegildo is facing the other direction, steering the boat still. Will, with his clothes in a pile on the floor, in nothing but his underwear, crawls onto the stack of mattresses, which are off-white with age and perhaps disgusting, but Will's slept on worse. Will can't decide how to lay, feeling each position is more awkward than the last. He ends up on his back, propped up on his elbows, watching the door.

Hannibal enters the cabin.

There's nothing more than a dingy light bulb swaying overhead and the light let in through the doorway— bright and gray from the overcast day, and then not even that, once Hannibal closes the door behind him. Hannibal, Will notes, locks the door.

Once they're alone there together, the tension in the room ratchets up by a thousand degrees, making Will feel hot all over. Will jerks his chin, beckoning Hannibal forward. Hannibal knees onto the makeshift bed, making the topmost mattress dip under his weight. Hannibal crawls then, over Will, his head hanging between his shoulders, his hair falling in his eyes. Will swallows thickly, his mouth feeling dry. Hannibal crawls over Will, hunkering over him, leaning down to kiss him close-mouthed, almost chastely. Will stretches, trying to get more, needing more. Will shifts his weight to one elbow and uses his other hand to reach down and tug at the hem of Hannibal's soaked shirt. Hannibal, understanding, sits back on his haunches, between Will's thigh, and removes his shirt, slowly. Will watches, rapt. Hannibal is all contours and lean muscle, looking stronger naked than he does clothed, looking *beautiful* . Hannibal slants his head down again then, crouching over Will like a predator once again, and noses at Will's sternum, at his armpit, at his neck, smelling him, brushing his lip softly against Will's throat without truly kissing him. "I'm starting to think—" Will gasps as Hannibal nips him, but forges onward, "I'm starting to think you get off to fucking with me."

Hannibal clicks his tongue in Will's ear. "The mouth on you," Hannibal admonishes quietly. Will shivers.

Do something about it then, Will wants to say, but bites his tongue. "Kiss me," he says instead, still feeling bold. And Hannibal does. God, Hannibal does. Hannibal kisses him, reaches a hand down between them and Will gasps as Hannibal touches him for the first time — it *feels* like the first time, every time. Hannibal works Will over slowly, painfully slowly, twisting his wrist in a maddening way. Hannibal thumbs the head of his cock and Will *writhes* . "*Fuck*," Will lets out in a breath.

"Would you like me to become angry with you?" Hannibal asks Will, maintaining his pace on Will's cock.

Will blinks some tears out of his eyes. "What?" he asks. Hannibal releases Will's cock but does not repeat his question. Will catches on. "No— I don't know," Will says, half-wanting

to say yes, *yes, be angry with me. Berate me, hit me,* hurt *me.* "I just want— I want—" but Will can't say it.

"Anything you want," Hannibal says, running his hand over Will's stomach, touching his chest, thumbing his nipple. Will arches into it slightly and considers his options. He could lie, which is nearly physically painful for him and not at all feasible, as Hannibal would likely see straight through it. He could be honest, candidly ask Hannibal for what he wants, which would be humiliating and difficult and perhaps result in death by embarrassment. Will remains silent for a moment longer, putting the decision off. Finally, Hannibal stops in his assiduous kissing of Will's chest and stomach. Will is flat on his back, with Hannibal laying on top of him, between his thighs, holding himself up on his elbows. He looks at Will in his eyes, and Will looks back. "Anything you want," Hannibal repeats clearly, enunciating every word.

"Hold me down," Will says, in a rush. He closes his eyes once the words leave his mouth, wishing desperately he could take it back. He continues, "Tell me— tell me that I'm bad. That I'm— *misbehaving*." He stutters and stumbles but he says it, he fucking says it, he manages. "*Please*," he whispers at the end.

For a moment, Hannibal's face is blank. Not that eerie blankness Will sees in him sometimes but a more inviting appearance— he's thinking. Finally, the expressiveness returns to his face and his hand creeps down the length of Will's body. Will is still hard, as though the embarrassment is just as arousing as the rest of it, and Hannibal begins to touch him again. "Your behavior has been extremely untoward, Will. Do you *wish* to be punished?" Hannibal asks and Will shakes his head, feeling red-hot and overwhelmed, but loving it. "Oh, but I think you do," Hannibal says, his voice low and a shade threatening. "I believe you want me to discipline you. I believe you enjoy misbehaving and hope for results." Will brings his hands up to cover his face, thrusting helplessly into Hannibal's hand. "Does that embarrass you, Will? Are you embarrassed?"

Will shakes his head again, though he answers, "Yes," muffled by his hands.

"You want to be embarrassed," Hannibal asserts. Hannibal clicks his tongue again and Will must be developing a Pavlovian response, because he feels his cock twitch in Hannibal's hand. Will whines. "Quiet. He will hear you," Hannibal says and Will whines again, the thought of being overheard suddenly striking him down. Hannibal quickens his pace on Will's cock. "Do you want me inside you?" Hannibal asks, doesn't wait for an answer. He continues, "You would say it differently, I am sure. You would ask me to *fuck* you." Will begins to pant, heavily, using one hand to cover his own mouth and gripping Hannibal's arm with the other. "Do you want me to *fuck you,* Will?"

And it's that, hearing Hannibal swear, hearing Hannibal ask him that question, in that way, that sends Will over the edge. He spills over Hannibal's hand, over his own stomach, down his thighs, too much, too much. It's then, as he's coming down but before Hannibal's pulled his hand away, that Will realizes he's speaking. "Yes, yes, yes, please, *please*," he's chanting, over and over again, a whispered prayer.

"Good boy," Hannibal says in Will's ear as he rests his hand on Will's stomach and Will hears it as though it's reverberating in his head. *Good boy,* Will thinks. *Good boy, good boy,*

good boy. Will thinks, somewhat facetiously, *Fucking finally.*

Will and Hannibal lie together for a little while after everything's over, sweat-sticky and cocooned in moth-bitten blankets. Will runs his fingers through Hannibal's dark chest hair, enjoying the raspy feel on his palm. Will is thinking. He's thinking about what Hannibal said earlier— the mention of his sister. Will maps out Hannibal's family tree in his mind: a Japanese aunt, likely a Lithuanian uncle married to the aunt and related to Hannibal by blood, mysterious, unnamed parents, and a sister. A sister. Will closes his eyes and he can picture her. She would be small, bright, with curious eyes. She would be like Hannibal, Will imagines, only gentler. Too gentle, perhaps, for this world. "What happened to Mischa?" Will breaks the silence, once again asking a question without meaning to.

Hannibal doesn't answer for a long time. So long, Will thinks he's not going to answer, and feels guilty for asking. He shouldn't have asked. He and Hannibal have grown close in the past two months, but they've only known each other for that short time— not long enough to build deep, intimate trust that would likely be required for sharing what Will has asked Hannibal to share.

But eventually, interrupting Will's self-deprecatory train of thought, Hannibal speaks. He says, and nothing else, "I miss her every day."

CHAPTER XII

Chapter Notes

> Obligatory apologies for my absence (damn you, Covid) and earnest gratitude for your continued support. Hope you enjoy this mini-update!

Will and Gio sit together, cross-legged, on the floor of Will's room, sorting photographs. Will surveys, fondly, the many colorful photos laid out on the floor between them, of Gio and her friends, Gio and her family, Gio and Will. Will even appears, begrudgingly, in some of the group shots, often in the corner, hauled into frame by one of Gio's well-meaning friends, who often go out of their way to make Will feel included (with the perhaps notable exception of Valeria, who appears in group photos less and less the more snide remarks she makes in Will's direction). Will is behind the camera for most of the pictures, however, which almost makes him value them more. His eyes are drawn to a particular picture of Gio and her friend Bianca, holding hands and nearly kissing, their noses brushing. An extremely, painfully intimate moment which Will was allowed in on, allowed to witness. Will wishes he had a more artful eye, but he supposes he's good enough to take the pictures that matter.

"Okay," Gio says finally, once the photos are all spread out, "pick some out." Will looks up at her and she smiles warmly. He raises his eyebrows and she gestures to the pile. "Pick out your favorites to keep," she clarifies. Then, she looks to one of the four blank walls of Will's room— the one opposite the bed and the window overlooking Will's tree, and tilts her head thoughtfully. "Maybe that wall will be good for a, um," she hesitates, thinking of the word, "cork board! To hang them," she clarifies. Will looks back down at the pictures and feels overwhelmed by choice. So many of them are sweet, special moments, shared between true friends. The fact that Will *has* friends, for the first time in his life, hits him all at once and he brushes his hands over the nearest picture— a slightly blurry shot of Gio and Will together, their heads tilted towards one another, caught off guard by the camera, whispering as though they're conspiring together. The photo makes Will's chest glow with inner warmth.

"This one," he says softly, pointing to it.

"Aw," Gio's voice is sweet like honey, "that's my favorite, too," she says. Will smiles at her, still feeling that warmth. After a moment's pause, Gio speaks again. "You seem so happy lately," she says. "I'm happy for you."

Will looks down at the picture again. He *is* happy, is the thing. So happy, it worries him. He can't sleep at night lately, up thinking about Hannibal. All kinds of thoughts— thoughts of his long, gorgeous cock in Will's mouth, thoughts of his strange, probing questions, thoughts of conversations they may have the next time they see each other. He thinks about how happy he is, what it means for him, if it'll last. If Hannibal will get wise to the fact that Will is not all that interesting, truly, or if he'll be able to keep the unintentional ruse going a little longer.

Will thinks now about the fact that the year will end, and he'll return to America, oceans away from Hannibal Lecter. Will wonders if he'll ever be happy without an encroaching set of anxieties to discourage him. Will shakes his head. He does his best to focus in on what Gio's saying. He's happy. He *is* happy. He opens his mouth to respond, but jumps when a melody bursts into the air. Will locates the source quickly: his tiny cell phone. Will's still not used to the sound of its ring. "One moment," Will says apologetically, answering the phone. "Hello?" He phrases it like a question even though there's only one person who would be calling him.

Hannibal says, "Hello, Will." Will smiles at the sound of Hannibal's voice, at the sound of his own name. He is happy. "Are you available this afternoon?"

"Depends," Will says, sounding coy to his own ears. He must, because Gio raises her eyebrows suggestively. "What did you have in mind?" Will asks, feeling emboldened.

Hannibal chuckles on his end of the line. "I had intended for us to spend the day in Florence, though, if you have other plans…"

'*Florence,*' Will mouths to Gio excitedly. She grins and gives two thumbs up. "I mean…" Will simpers, feeling, for once in his life, an inkling of confidence, "I guess I'll think about it." He tucks the cell phone between his ear and shoulder and begins to shuffle the photos around again, just looking for something to do with his hands, not sure what normal people do when on the phone. Will smiles at the floor in front of him. "Thought about it. I'm in." Gio laughs at Will's antics and Will smiles some more.

"I'll be there in an hour," Hannibal says.

Forty-five minutes later Will's sitting on the curb in the staff parking lot, looking at the main road and wondering what Hannibal has in store for him. It's a cold, drizzly day and Will's grateful for his new winter wardrobe, which keeps him warm and dry even in the icy outdoor air. Still, Will is without gloves, and breathes hotly into his cupped hands. Will peers down the main road again, watching for the Benz. His eyes widen minutely, curiously, when a motorcycle speeds around the bend and into sight. The motorcyclist is clad all in black, with a shiny helmet and leather jacket. They approach swiftly, speeding up to Will and pulling into the spot nearest to him in the blink of an eye. Will watches with interest as the cyclist removes their helmet.

It's Hannibal.

His hair is slightly, attractively mussed from the helmet, and the collar of his leather jacket is flipped up. He looks like a magazine cover, straddling his bike with the kickstand out, leather clad. Rain water rolls off his leather jacket in fat droplets and Will watches them race with fascination. His mouth feels suddenly dry. Hannibal smiles elusively, just with his eyes. Will, without meaning to, leans *in* slightly, tilting his head towards Hannibal. Hannibal leans in as well and says, "Perhaps it is best we make our departure." Then, he twists his body, reaching

in the storage compartment at the back of the motorcycle and pulling out a second helmet. Hannibal holds the helmet out and nods his head, indicating Will mount the motorcycle.

Will swallows thickly, and his throat clicks. He still feels unable to speak, half-hard in his trousers. Will takes the helmet and climbs onto the bike, very aware of his stirring cock as he presses his body against Hannibal's. He feels slightly embarrassed, though he knows it's only a natural reaction to Hannibal and that Hannibal himself likely doesn't mind. Will, in addition, feels slightly good about feeling embarrassed, and wonders why he can't feel emotions in the normal arrangement— good about good things, bad about bad things. *I should give up,* Will thinks, *on hoping for normal.* So Will straddles the bike, his front pressed against Hannibal's back, and Hannibal is undoubtedly aware of his arousal, but doesn't mention it.

"I've never been on a motorcycle," Will says as he puts on the helmet, tucking his rain-stained glasses into his shirt pocket. His voice comes out muffled. It's secure, tight, and slightly uncomfortable. Though Will, knowing some of the statistics on motorcycle accidents, is grateful Hannibal thought of his safety.

Will winds his arms around Hannibal's waist as Hannibal speaks. "Are you nervous?" he asks, kicking up the kickstand.

The engine roars to life, and Will has to raise his voice to be heard. "Very," Will shouts and they're off.

Florence is as beautiful, if not more beautiful than, the drive there, though the drive is, admittedly, slightly terrifying. Hannibal drives well, weaving around cars and bends in the road deftly, as though he's been riding motorcycles his entire life, but he drives *fast*. Will holds Hannibal's body tightly, tucking his face into Hannibal's shoulder as much as possible with the helmet on. Will feels less aroused and more exhilarated by the moment, adrenaline coursing through his veins. The wind whips Will's clothes around his body and Will almost wishes he could feel it on his face, though he remains grateful for the helmet. Hannibal steers them around a particularly sharp bend and Will tightens his grip around Hannibal's waist. The city comes into view and Will, from within his helmet, gasps inaudibly, the sound swallowed up by the wind. The buildings are full of windows and life and Will watches the world around him with wide eyes. He's seen some of it before, of course, but only in the dark, on the way to and from Hannibal's apartment. In the daylight, it's something else entirely. Bright and shining all around him. From a distance, Will can see some of the tallest chapels, nearly piercing the sky, their rotund roofs calling to Will. *Qui, qui, qui* , they call out as Will and Hannibal speed toward them, toward the heart of the city.

After weaving through cobble streets and back alleys for what seems like only a few moments, Will and Hannibal arrive to one of the main roads, a rue bustling with people, all wealthy-looking men with women on their arms, or women with shopping-bag-laden companions, knitting together to a create a scene of movement. They're right on the river, and Will can smell the water in the clear Fall air. He can smell, also, perfumes of shoppers and samples, food somewhere in the distance, and the unmistakable scent of fabric, all around

them. Will knows they're surrounded by high-end boutiques before he's able to put his glasses on and read the signs. He knows where they are even, and knew before they arrived. *Via dei Serragli* . Will feels excitement and nerves stir in his stomach. He can only imagine what Hannibal has in store for him in a place like this.

Hannibal finds parking quickly, clearly knowing this city more intimately than Will could ever hope to. Will dismounts the bike before Hannibal, raising his arms to remove his helmet and swaying on his feet slightly, suddenly feeling ill. Hannibal, still on the bike, reaches strong arms out to catch him, steady him. "Sea legs, hm," Hannibal says, nearly inaudibly, as though it's a private joke. Will chuckles and Hannibal releases him, clearly a little reluctant. Will removes his helmet and shakes his head. Hannibal does the same and Will can't help but stare at Hannibal's mussed hair, his amused expression, the glint in his eye. Will digs his glasses out of his shirt pocket, wanting the image to be even clearer.

Once his glasses are on, Will spares a look around as well, at the beautiful buildings, at the beautiful people. It's something to behold, though it intimidates Will slightly, all the potential to be overwhelmed. As if reading his mind, Hannibal says, "If it becomes too much to bear, we may leave at a moment's notice." Will can't help but smile at Hannibal, broadly, feeling warm. He's found, despite the fact that it slightly unnerves him, he *likes* when Hannibal pulls his mind-reading trick. He likes Hannibal, really, and that's the crux of it all.

"Where to first?" Will asks, looking around, knowing already that the day's trip will be filled to the brim with activity, as much as Will can bear.

Hannibal has that familiar glint in his eye, denoting a mischievous air about him. "Tell me, Will," Hannibal says keenly, looking down at Will's hands, "are you cold?"

Will, suddenly aware of his naked, ungloved hands, stuffs them in his pockets, embarrassed. They're tinged pink with cold. "No," Will says, half-meaning it. In the sweater, jacket, pants, and boots, he's quite warm. It's only his hands which are cold and his fleece-lined pockets make quick work of warming them. Will squeezes his hands into fists, willing them to warm faster. "Just my hands," Will lets slip, ever unable to tell a lie.

Hannibal looks around as though taking in their surroundings for the first time, though Will can tell he's been here before. Hannibal's head turns as he scans the crowd, an owl flying over a field rich with mice. Finally, Hannibal's gaze lands on a shop down the road, less busy than the surrounding storefronts, with a little sign out front that Will can't quite make out. *Something, something, leather, goods, something,* Will thinks, gleaning the necessary information, needing a new prescription. Leather goods. Will's not sure what that means in terms of himself and Hannibal, but he gets all kinds of ideas looking at Hannibal in his collarless black leather jacket. Hannibal smiles that not-quite-there smile, tilts his head towards the shop, indicating they go there. Hannibal begins a brisk pace across the street and Will, dutifully, follows.

The leather goods shop is incredible. It smells a little too strong for Will, though he's not as especially sensitive to smell as he is to everything else. The interior is beautiful, though; the

whole thing is draped in shades of tan, brown, cream, more warm tones than Will knew existed. Will didn't previously think he cared much about leather, with the exception of Hannibal in the jacket, but in this moment he finds he loves it rather desperately. And he *wants* — wants to try things on, feel them against his skin, bring pieces home. He wants to have things bought for him, just for him, and this is the first time he's openly acknowledged those feelings within his own mind. It feels dangerous, and seductive.

"I am afraid the gloves simply…" Hannibal surveys the shop smoothly, then lands on Will once again, "slipped my mind." Hannibal nods his head to a rack set into one of the far walls, coated in layers and layers of gloves of all shades and sizes. "If we may rectify the situation…" Hannibal trails off, leaving the implication in the air all around them.

Will feels the incongruent urge to deny Hannibal this, to turn down his offer, despite the fact that he already conceded within his own mind that he does, in fact, want to walk away with something. He interrogates himself, wondering what the *fucking hang up* is. Propriety? Dignity? *Decency* ? Those things feel far foregone, long gone, as though Will is watching them in the rear-view mirror. Will walks towards the wall of gloves once again and considers a pale, cream colored pair, almost the color of Hannibal's pale skin. He reaches a hand out to brush the material, feeling the softness just barely under his fingertips. *Beautiful*, he thinks, unbidden. *I want it,* he thinks further. "This pair," escapes Will's mouth without his permission.

Hannibal gives him an appraising look, as if he's… *improved*. Improved at what exactly? Bending to Hannibal's whims?

Will is still himself, so firmly, but it's as though a part of him is in the rear-view mirror as well. Hannibal is speaking to the owner of the leather goods shop in fast-paced Italian and it all feels like background noise. Will feels disquieted at the normalcy of it all, at how it was… *easy* to agree. To acquiesce to Hannibal, and all he insists upon. A mirror hangs above the wall of gloves, nearly at Will's eye-level. *Your name is Will Graham,* Will tells himself, insisting.

Whether it's Hannibal talking Will into buying things or Will wanting the things himself, they end up buying so much together that it has to be shipped back to St. Gabriel. Will hopes desperately that the school doesn't consider opening the packages to inspect them, as Will's not sure how he would explain the silk pajamas. Though they're not especially intimate, Will feels embarrassed by them all the same. Will shakes the thought from his mind. With Hannibal's name on the return address, there's no reason for the school to become suspicious of even a large quantity of packages, and no one but Will will open them. He assures himself of this as he climbs on the back of Hannibal's motorcycle.

Hannibal, sitting in front of Will, moves to put his helmet on but hesitates, uncharacteristically. He turns his body to speak to Will and Will watches his face in profile. "Will you marry me?" Hannibal asks Will, surprising him. Will's mind catches up to itself and Will, understanding the joke, laughs jubilantly. Hannibal puts on his helmet without

responding, obscuring his face. Will winds his arms around Hannibal's waist and realizes something's wrong, but he doesn't know what. He feels as though it's all around him, and perhaps has been from the start.

CHAPTER XIII

Chapter Notes

Home-stretch now, baby!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The feeling of ‘wrongness’ does not go away and Will does not know what to do with it. Will paces in his room, half in a new suit Hannibal has bought for him, with no tie and half the buttons left undone. *What is it? What is it? What is it?* bounces around in Will’s mind, reverberating off the inner walls of his skull. *What’s wrong?* Will wishes he could shed the feeling, hang it up in his closet and go out with Hannibal, have a pleasant evening, come home to his dorm and put the feeling on again. He doesn’t *want it*. Everything is going so well. He’s going to fuck it up with the force of his own worry, he’s sure. He’s manifesting something horrible by expecting it, God. *God*, he can’t handle this. He looks down and realizes he’s flapping his hands, something he hasn’t done involuntarily since childhood, and he stops himself, squeezing his thumbs in his hands instead. *Jesus Christ,* Will thinks, *I’m unhinged*.

Will’s phone blings with a message from Hannibal. *Leaving the apartment now,* the text reads. Will punches in a reply quickly. *OK.* Will’s half-tempted to call Hannibal and call the whole night off, though that’d only be further self-sabotage. Will catches his own eye in his reflection and shakes his head at himself. *Behave,* he thinks firmly. He’s alright, Will assures himself. This will be another wonderful night with Hannibal and nothing more. He won’t allow it to spiral into anything else. Will buttons his shirt, omits the tie all together, slips on his shining leather dress shoes, and shrugs on his jacket and thick, winter coat. *Behave,* Will reminds himself once more as he steps out the door and into the stairwell. *Behave.*

Hannibal arrives precisely on time, if not a few minutes before he said he would, as he always does. He’s driving the Benz, obviously, and not the motorcycle. Will logically registers that this is the best decision, considering their formal wear, but part of him misses the motorcycle. Will never knew he was such a thrill-seeker, until he met Hannibal. Now his curiosity and dark, intense, hidden desires get the best of him more often with each encroaching day. Hannibal gets out of the car and opens the door for Will and Will climbs into the passenger’s seat, settling in and trying to cool his nerves.

They arrive at the restaurant, one Will and Hannibal have never been to together before, after the sun has set, when the sky is a deep purplish blue and the stars are pinpricks in the stratosphere, just barely visible. Parking is strangely available, with the cars surrounding the restaurant only sparsely. Hannibal opens the door for Will and Will steps out, looking around. The restaurant is the only building with lights on at this time, though Will can see through the windows that it's completely empty, with the exception of some staff wiping down tables. "I don't think it's open," Will says, turning to look at Hannibal with a pit of anxiety building in his stomach. This is the first time something Hannibal's planned has ever gone awry, and Will doesn't know what to do, or what will happen.

Hannibal, strangely, remains unperturbed. He simply smiles and touches Will's elbow gently, leading him towards the entrance of the restaurant. Will follows dutifully, though he continues to peer into the window, interested by the absence of any other patrons. The warm lighting of the restaurant spills out onto the pavement of the surrounding sidewalk, which should be busy with the foot-traffic of patrons, rich, balding men with glittering women on their arms, rich, mature women with young men on their arms. But no one. Will half-expects a cartoon tumbleweed to blow across the street. Hannibal holds the door to the restaurant open for him.

Once they're through the front door, as a coat check takes Will's coat, it occurs to Will wants going on.

He chuckles humorlessly and asks Hannibal, "You reserved the whole restaurant, didn't you?" though it's not really a question. Will knows. Hannibal reserved an entire restaurant to ensure that Will wouldn't experience even an ounce of sensory overload, to ensure that Will would have total privacy, to ensure that Will would be able to express his autistic traits as overtly as he wished. Will feels a stab of gratitude, which he almost mistakes for guilt.

Hannibal straightens his suit jacket and looks to a table in the center of the room, which is set with dishes, silver, and candles, and asks, "Does the fact make you uncomfortable, Will?"

Will considers this. "Comfort…" Will begins, chewing the word, "is something I am not accustomed to. If I were to encounter… *comfort*, I'm not sure I'd recognize it, honestly." Will remembers the first dinner he had with Hannibal, back when Will called him 'Dr. Lecter' and was half-afraid of him, completely intimidated, already attached. Perhaps he's never been comfortable, but he's always felt safe around Hannibal. Cared for, even. "I think there's more to life than being comfortable," Will says finally, as they take their seats across from each other. Hannibal is beautiful in the candlelight; looks like a sculpture. Will registers an innate desire within him to *touch.* Will ignores this urge in favor of listening to Hannibal speak.

"Some might say that comfort is simply the state which we prefer for the meat we consume, and nothing more," Hannibal says lightly, unbuttoning his jacket. Will does the same. "Regardless, 'discomfort' as we know it, is a necessary component to life, as you alluded to." Hannibal smiles. "Though, I will admit, I never wish to *overwhelm* you."

Will appreciates this, and acknowledges within his mind that Hannibal has never intentionally overwhelmed him, and clearly doesn't plan to, if this dinner is any point of reference. Will appreciates that Hannibal has Will's best interests at heart and Will values their… relationship? Friendship? Whatever they have, Will feels it has come to matter so

much to him, and provide him with a great deal of fulfillment, he can't help but to be grateful for it and all the discomfort it brings him. "Thanks," Will says awkwardly, wishing to express himself but struggling to do so, always.

Hannibal accepts this graciously, nodding his head. "May I order for you tonight?" Hannibal asks him, swiftly changing the subject, doing Will a favor.

Will bites his lip, considering it, and then nods his head. "Yes," he adds redundantly. Hannibal gives Will that sweet, shark-like grin and calls the waiter over to their table.

Hannibal orders them both complicated vegetarian dishes, with no alcohol for either of them. Will wonders about this but doesn't ask. He figures it has something to do with the way he acted the last time Hannibal supplied him with wine. He remembers it slightly fuzzy, though admittedly a little fondly. It felt undeniably good to be unbridled by inhibition, and Will is able to admit this within his own mind. He appreciates the sobriety though, as he's always preferred a clear head. He resents, slightly, the feeling that Hannibal's treating him with kid gloves. It's all so complicated, Will has trouble keeping it straight in his head, even sober. He's grateful, he thinks. Will takes a sip of his water, which is chilled but not iced, and looks at Hannibal with a little scrutiny. *What do you see in me?* Will thinks. Will has never understood what Hannibal wants from him. If it was about sex, if it was about taking advantage, would it not be easier to get Will drunk? Will looks down at the tablecloth, banishing that dark thought. The question remains. What does Hannibal see in Will? Will doesn't know. "Is this a date?" he asks. Will's not sure that's the root of the issue, but perhaps it's a start.

Hannibal swallows, looks at Will directly in the eyes. Will remembers a time when he couldn't bear to make eye contact with Hannibal, though he wanted to. God, he wanted to. Hannibal says, "You can have anything you want, Will." Subtext is something Will seldom reads but all he can hear when Hannibal speaks is, *I can give you anything you want, Will*. And Will hears, *So what do you want?*

Will, still, at 17, doesn't know what he wants. He doesn't know what he was looking for when he moved to Italy, when he agreed to that first lunch-meeting with Hannibal, and every rendezvous after that. To be understood? To be loved? Thinking about it, it all feels so naïve. What kind of adult moves halfway across the world for love? Will searches desperately for something within himself to change the subject, to distract him from this line of thinking. God, sometimes Will gets sick of himself. "How much did this all cost?" is what Will comes up with, a question he half-regrets by the time it makes it out of his mouth.

Hannibal looks at Will with a peculiar glint in his eye. "That is a very rude question, Will," Hannibal says. Will feels suddenly warm. *This is a date,* Will realizes. Was it ever anything else? Will knows how this will end, he thinks. He thinks he knows how most good dates end. Hannibal has a smile playing at his lips, and Will wants to bite his jugular, to be made to lose control, *Jesus Christ,* Will thinks, feeling almost dizzy, almost grinning.

Will and Hannibal share a moment of intense eye contact where they seem to have come to an understanding. Will doesn't know how this happened; two men from completely different

worlds, who know, materially, very little about one another, but somehow comprehend one another in their entirety, or at least are beginning to. “You don’t mind,” Will asserts, regarding the initial question. It’s not a question. He knows Hannibal. He knows Hannibal doesn’t mind.

“No, Will,” Hannibal replies. “I do not mind.”

For the remainder of the dinner, the charged energy endures. All thoughts of Will’s self-hatred are banished from his mind. He watches Hannibal’s mouth shamelessly as Hannibal takes bite after delicate bite of the mouth-watering meal laid before them. Will’s pretty sure he knows exactly what’s going to happen when they return to Hannibal’s apartment and he anticipates it with a great deal of excitement and a fair amount of nervousness. Will understands the mechanics of sex, but has only ever done what he and Hannibal have done together before. In a way, this is a relief. Will, as ridiculous as it sounds, even in his own head, wants Hannibal to be his first everything. Hannibal must sense this, as he keeps giving Will *looks* over his glass of water, subtle at first but more blatant as the night goes on, to the point where Will feels half-indecent to be on the other end of them. Eventually, after what borders on a painful amount of time spent looking at one another and taking slow, ridiculously seductive bites of their meals, long after Will begins to feel vapid with want, their plates and glasses are empty and it’s time to leave. Hannibal seems to walk with an achingly slow stride towards the coat check, seems to put on his coat at a glacial pace. Will watches with a hunger. He *wants*.

The ride to Hannibal’s apartment is silent. The journey up the stairs to Hannibal’s floor is silent. The process of removing their respective coats and shoes is silent. Will swears he could hear a pin drop. He actually *can* hear Hannibal’s eerily steady breath, which never quickens, even as Will dares to place a hand on the small of Hannibal’s back as he’s turned away.

“Yes, Will?” Hannibal says without turning around, just with the tilt of his head, as though Will asked a question. In a way, Will supposes he did.

“I want—” Will starts but finds he has nothing to say. What does he want, exactly? He seems to come to this question again and again, always in Hannibal’s presence. Finally, Will manages to say it. He just says it. “I want you to fuck me, Hannibal.” *God,* Will thinks, *Jesus Christ.* It sounds filthy coming out of Will’s mouth and Will feels a shiver run down the length of his spine. Will slips his hand under Hannibal’s waistcoat. *In for a penny,* Will thinks. “Please,” he adds.

Hannibal turns around slowly, almost predatorily, his movement falling into the uncanny valley in a way that Will finds indescribable yet attractive. Hannibal’s breath remains preternaturally steady as Will pulls his hand away, holds it to his chest, fidgets, adjusts his glasses. Hannibal removes Will’s glasses altogether, which shocks him a little bit, and

Hannibal pockets them. Hannibal's hands move, then, to Will's button up, and he begins undoing the buttons, starting at Will's stiff collar, and working his way down to Will's navel. He talks as he goes: "You are being rather disobedient, Will," he says. Will sucks in a deep breath. "Would you like for me to hit you? Is that what you want?" Will lets the breath out. He feels like he's on *fucking fire* . "Or would you prefer I over-stimulate you, touch you until you cannot bear it any longer, until you beg me to stop?" Will lets out an involuntary, high-pitched sound. Hannibal rips the last of the buttons off, tearing the shirt off Will's body and Will lets out a yelp in earnest, like a kicked puppy, shocking himself, but not Hannibal. Hannibal tosses the shirt to the floor carelessly and takes a step further into Will's space. "Or do you simply wish for me to fuck you until you cannnot speak?" Hannibal begins undoing the fly of Will's slacks.

Will's hands are balled into fists at his sides and he finds he can't move, though he wishes desperately to run his fingers through Hannibal's hair, to touch his face, to close the gap between him and kiss him.

Hannibal pulls Will's pants down roughly until they're pooled around Will's ankles. Hannibal takes a step back and orders, "Step towards me." His voice is commanding and almighty and Will has no choice but to heed Hannibal's word. Will takes a step forward and out of the crumpled stacks, towards Hannibal, into his arms. Hannibal holds Will for a moment, his arms soft and strong against Will's bare back. "Good boy," Hannibal murmurs into Will's hair and Will shoves his face into Hannibal's chest, nearly unable to bear it. Hannibal backs away from Will slowly, only slightly, enough to look him in the eyes. "To bed now, Will," Hannibal orders gently. Will turns, making his way to Hannibal's bedroom, shaking. He knows what's going to happen. He knows, and the anticipation sits in his throat like a lump he can't swallow. He wants, and the desire grows roots in his stomach like a twisted tree.

Hannibal, kneeling above him and fully clothed, has Will propped up on his knees and elbows, on a towel laid on top of the deep-red duvet. Hannibal stretches Will open, using his fingers and his tongue, for what feels like hours. Will writhes and squirms and squeals and nothing he does encourages Hannibal to relent. If anything, Will's movement and noise seem to hearten Hannibal in his endeavor to break Will into tiny pieces. Will is not a religious person but he gasps for breath and prays in a way he has never prayed in his entire life: *Please, God, forgive me for how badly I need this. Please, God, I want it. Let me live to have it.*

Finally, Hannibal shows mercy, and removes his fingers, pulls away. Even that, though, is a little torture, as all Will can feel is the absence. He feels empty, and aching. He shoves his face further into the duvet as he just barely makes out the sound of Hannibal's trousers unzipping. Will gasps as Hannibal grabs his hips firmly, his hands so hot Will feels branded, and finally, fucking *finally* , the blunt, slick head of Hannibal's cock presses against Will.

It feels too big, impossibly big. Will wants to cry.

Hannibal pushes forward further and for a moment, it really seems as though it won't work. Will bites down on his lip until he tastes blood. It's all too much, it's always been too much;

Will is broken, and can never be fixed. This won't work and Will will be sent home, shivering, half-dressed, *Jesus Christ* , Will thinks. Then, Hannibal is inside Will.

The feeling is, at first, not very pleasant. Then, Hannibal begins to thrust, languid and slow, pushing in a little deeper each time with a clear, deliberate, gentleness. Will, were he in his right mind, would perhaps resent this slightly. Instead, he feels overwhelmed with pleasure, white-hot and coursing through him. He wriggles slightly. "Please," he breathes, not meaning to. Hannibal draws back, thrusting deeper than he did before. *God,* it feels good. Hannibal explained to him in the shower about the prostate, and Will doesn't think Hannibal's hit it yet, but it already feels so, inconceivably good. Will is going to ask for this from Hannibal every day for the rest of his *life* . Hannibal places his palm flat against the small of Will's back and increases his pace and Will *arches* . "Harder," Will manages to say, barely cognizant of his own wants. Hannibal pushes deeper, and Will can tell that the full length of Hannibal is not inside Will yet; he can't imagine how that would feel. Will feels so full already. He repeats, "Please."

Finally, Hannibal's front is flush to Will's back and Will is completely encompassed by his pleasure. He feels nothing, but Hannibal. He feels it in his pounding head, in the base of his spine, in his fucking *fingertips.* He clutches the duvet underneath him, feels the soft texture of the towel underneath his knees; a sob escapes him. Still, he wants it *harder* .

He can't express this. He's not sure he even wants to. *Jesus. This is all so fucked up,* Will thinks. And then Hannibal thrusts in again and Will thinks nothing at all. Hannibal hits his prostate once, twice, and Will's mind whites out. He comes without warning, over the towel, the orgasm rocking his whole body. It feels so fucking good it almost hurts and Will emits an inhuman sound. Hannibal runs his hands along Will's waist and back, petting Will's sweat-slick skin, fucks Will through it. Hannibal murmurs a sound Will can barely make out, a word he's never heard before, it sounds like: "*Mylimas*."

Afterwards, once Hannibal has pulled out and finished by his own hand (regretfully), Will is tucked into a new set of sheets, wearing a set of Hannibal's pajamas, which are comfortably oversized on him, and he is drifting off. Hannibal moves around the bedroom silently, tidying at first, then changing in pajamas, then applying some sort of cream to his face. He is freshly showered and when he leans down to kiss Will, his hair drips onto Will's forehead. Will smiles briefly up at Hannibal and asks, softly, if he can spend the night. Hannibal draws away slightly, and his face is immersed in shadow, inscrutable. "It's what I want," Will says. And it is, but more than that, Will wants *Hannibal* to want him to stay.

Hannibal reaches out a hand and brushes Will's curls away from his temples. "Then of course," he says, and Will closes his eyes, hums. As he falls asleep, he thinks that he does wish Hannibal would *hurt* him, but that he can never ask for that. *Never,* Will thinks. It would be too much of an admission of all the ways in which Will is defective, to admit such a thing. Maybe *that* is the wrongness which is following Will around.

Will thinks, also, of the word Hannibal used. *Mylimas.*

Mylimas, mylimas, mylimas.

Chapter End Notes

Hope y'all are excited for the next (final!) chapter ;)

CHAPTER XIV

Chapter Notes

TW for use of a homophobic slur in this chapter.

Hannibal drives Will home early in the morning, though it's not enough. As soon as Will's on school grounds, he's called to the headmaster's office. He walks slowly, wanting to bide his time and slightly sore. He doesn't even get a chance to sit in the waiting area in front of the office; he's invited directly in by the headmaster.

Will takes a seat in the uncomfortable chair across the desk from the headmaster and shifts awkwardly, reminded vividly of how it felt to have Hannibal inside him. He tries to shake the thoughts from his mind, focusing on the gruff headmaster, looking at Will from beneath a furrowed brow, sitting in front of him.

The headmaster stands, and begins to pace the office, circling Will. Will doesn't bother twisting around to track the headmaster, and instead focuses on the miniature globe set on the headmaster's desk, in interesting blue and purple hues. Will fixates on the tiny North American continent, on America, on the East Coast. He does his best to tune back into what the headmaster's saying. "…appropriate. Understood?"

Will, without looking away from the globe, asks, "What?"

The headmaster sighs, though, shockingly, does not lose his temper or raise his voice. Instead, he says in a slow, measured voice, "I called you here today to discuss your relationship with Hannibal Lecter." When Will says nothing, the headmaster continues, "A fellow student raised a concern that something… *unseemly* may have occurred between yourself and Signore Lecter. While *I* am sure this is not the case, the student insisted I arrange a meeting with you, to—" the headmaster clears his throat, walks around the desk, "give you the space to share your experiences, should you have any you wish to bring to light." Will still says nothing. "Well?" the headmaster prompts, taking a seat behind the desk. "Have you anything to say for yourself?"

Will considers this. He knows what he wants to say. He imagines it. *Yes, Signore Tondo, he fucks me up the ass. Is that what you wanted to hear?* He knows what Hannibal would want him to say. *Nothing inappropriate has occurred. He's my mentor.* He knows what his father would want him to say. *I'm no fucking faggot.* He knows what Gio would say— *trust yourself, Will,* she would say. *Trust yourself.*

"Nothing inappropriate has happened," leaves Will's mouth and even to his own ears, it sounds flat and emotionless— robotic. "He's my mentor." The lie nearly physically pains Will, and still, he's not sure it's the right decision. He tries to convince himself that the words

mean nothing, that they don't undo the past several months of bonding, of care and intimacy between two men, that the words don't tear down the trust built between them. Will feels sick to his stomach. "May I be excused?" Will forces himself to ask. He doesn't want to just leave. He wants to disappear.

Once he's back at his room, Will calls Hannibal. He still feels sick to his stomach, that old feeling of 'wrongness' seeming to encompass him. *I shouldn't have lied,* Will tells himself, feeling as though he's being punished by a God he doesn't believe in. Then he thinks, *What else could I have done?* He's not sure why he's calling Hannibal. Hannibal cannot undo the lie he told, cannot fix the way he feels, cannot help him. All Will wants from Hannibal, really, is to hear his voice.

Hannibal answers the phone on the second ring. "What's wrong?" he asks, and Will hears echoes of his voice last night, all powerful, commanding.

Will wonders at first how Hannibal knows something's wrong, but then realizes it's probably strange to be calling Hannibal so directly after seeing him. For some reason, he thinks about that word Hannibal used. *Mylimas* . "The headmaster called me into his office," Will begins. "He asked if anything inappropriate had happened between us. I—" Will stops, swallows around the lump in his throat, and continues, "I lied. I said you were just my mentor." The fact that Will lied is painful enough, but the fact that he lied on behalf of *someone else* … Will feels so out of character, so misplaced in his own body, he doesn't know what to do with himself. "I lied," he repeats. "Why did I lie?" he asks Hannibal helplessly, though he already knows the answer. He does what Hannibal wants him to do, even when Hannibal's not around. "It's not illegal," Will says, gaining speed. "It's not illegal in New York or here." Will looks down at his free hand and sees it's shaking. "I'm an adult," Will says. "I can drink, I can smoke, why can't I be with you?" Will's voice breaks on the last syllable.

"I am afraid you would lose your scholarship," Hannibal says evenly, "were the nature of our relationship to come to light." Will wipes at his face. Hannibal continues, "There is a stigma associated with a young man engaged in a romantic relationship with an older man which even my status could not protect you from. And your impending return to America is worth consideration." There's a pause, as though Hannibal expects Will to respond, but Will doesn't. It's the first time Hannibal's mentioned Will's imminent departure and Will feels hollowed out. He wants to cry, but doesn't. He *wants* to respond, but doesn't. He stands in the center of his room, looking at the corkboard Gio had insisted he hang on the wall, and feels like the world's most pathetic clown. The world's most spineless jellyfish. A wretched creature. "Though I wish to validate how difficult this decision must be," Hannibal says finally.

"Why does the decision belong to *you*?" Will demands, his own voice surprising him. His face feels hot and itchy and he wants to— to— *something*, Jesus Christ. "Come pick me up," Will says, then hangs up the phone. He doesn't know why he says that, exactly, but he knows Hannibal will be at St. Gabriel within the hour. Maybe that's what he wants.

In the space of that hour, Will does his best not to think about Hannibal. He showers, stretches himself out on his fingers. He towel-dries himself, his hair. He dresses. He thinks about Gio, and how she likely has a crush on her friend, how beautiful they look together in the pictures on the corkboard. He thinks about his father back in America, if he's had enough to make ends meet lately, without Will there to pick up odd jobs after school. He thinks about his scholarship, his grades, his homework, how it all bores him. How everything bores him, now. These days. Will shakes his head. That line of thinking leads to Hannibal. Everything leads to Hannibal, eventually.

Hannibal arrives in the Benz and Will climbs in. The ride to Hannibal's apartment is silent. Will still feels sick to his stomach. He still feels 'wrong'. He still says nothing.

Will strips the moment he's in the door of Hannibal's apartment. Then, he moves to Hannibal, tearing at the buttons on his shirt, focused on his task, avoiding eye contact with Hannibal. "Will," Hannibal says, his voice gentle yet firm, but Will ignores him. Will fumbles the fly of Hannibal's slacks and lets out a muttered expletive. "Will," Hannibal repeats, his voice even steelier, unyielding. Will looks up at Hannibal, finally, looking into his eyes for the first time since they said goodbye this morning, sure his face is twisted into some dismal expression of sadness and fury. All Will wants is to tell the truth. *Why do you deny me this?* Will thinks, hoping for Hannibal's mind-reading trick, getting nothing. Hannibal just looks at him, deeply into his eyes. Hannibal's eyes are so beautiful, so murky, Will feels as though he could sink into them. *I don't even know you,* Will thinks, feeling tortured. Really, Will knows very little about Hannibal. He doesn't know where he came from or what got him here. Perhaps the most honest word Hannibal ever spoke to him was '*mylimas*' and Will doesn't even know what it means.

"What?" Will insists, his voice venomous.

Hannibal says nothing. His expression is as cool and emotionless as ever.

Will continues, "Do you even— does your heartbeat ever speed up? Ever?" Will is suddenly overwhelmed by the memory of his back pressed to Hannibal's chest as Hannibal worked him over, the pace of Hannibal's heartbeat never quickening, no matter what Will did. "I mean," Will says, raising his voice, "don't you *care* about me? Doesn't it drive you crazy?" Will demands, not sure what he's referring to. *The whole thing,* Will thinks. *The whole godforsaken thing.* "God, *fuck*," Will says, running his hands through his hair. It all seems to be crashing down on him. The want, the need, the 'wrong', all he's been aching with the past few months, since he met Hannibal, it all seems to be pressing in on him like his head's in a trash compactor and there's *nothing he can do*. "This is all so fucked up," Will says, his voice a whisper. He turns away from Hannibal. Will can't bear to look at him. Hannibal reaches a hand out, brushing Will's shoulder, his shirt still unbuttoned, his trousers undone. "Don't *fucking* touch me," Will spits, barely looking at Hannibal. Hannibal pulls his hand away.

“I am unsure—” Hannibal starts, then stops. The pause is uncharacteristic, as though Hannibal’s flustered, and the fact brings Will some vindication. Hannibal swallows, then says, “I do not know how to bring you comfort in this moment.”

Will looks at Hannibal with tears welling in his eyes and says— says—

“Kiss me.”

And Hannibal does.

They kiss for what feels like a very long time before Will, teary-eyed but no longer *burning* with rage, leads Hannibal to the bedroom, still kissing his mouth, his neck, his exposed chest. “I want you to fuck me,” Will’s saying, half-delirious with emotion, “until it hurts. Please, *please*. I’ll beg for it, I just need—” Hannibal strokes the back of Will’s neck, through his hair, murmurs something unintelligible, perhaps in another language.

Maybe it’s fucked up. Maybe Will’s not in his right mind, and asking for what he doesn’t understand, but maybe he’s not in his right mind and finally asking for what he’s always wanted. *Am I going to regret this? Is it going to hurt?* Will wonders. Then, he thinks, *I fucking hope so.*

He falls back on Hannibal’s bed and starts tugging off his clothes, wanting to be naked as soon as possible. Hannibal takes off his shirt, then pauses nearly mechanically in the motion, so still it’s almost frightening. But Will could never be afraid of Hannibal. “Are you sure you want this?” Hannibal asks softly, his voice sounding half-wounded. “I do not wish to hurt you.”

Will huffs in frustration, now stripped naked, raw and bared to Hannibal. “I know what I want,” he says. Will thinks he means it. He really, really wants to mean it. He hopes that’s enough. *It has to be enough,* Will thinks as he pulls Hannibal’s pants down to the middle of his thighs. Hannibal takes a step back and removes them the rest of the way. Will looks up at him from his place on the bed, Hannibal standing above him, and Will… Will looks up at him and he… it’s too much to think, even in his own head. “Please,” Will begs, his voice a shattered mirror, a cry, a whisper, everything.

Hannibal leans down and kisses him, closed-mouthed, nearly chaste. “Whatever it is you want,” Hannibal murmurs against his mouth, “I will give you.”

Hannibal crawls onto the bed, hunkering down over Will, until they’re tangled together the wrong way on the bed, until they’re so close they’re breathing each other’s breath, until there’s nothing but the two of them, alone in the entire world, alone together, and for a moment, it’s everything Will wants. And then he says, “Hit me.”

“*Harder*,” Will demands as Hannibal fucks him, one hand on his hip and one hand tangled in his mop of curls. “*Please*,” Will begs and Hannibal thrusts *in*, harder with each stroke, until it fucking *hurts*, *Jesus Christ,* Will thinks, *it hurts.*

Hannibal stands slightly to the right of the bed, wiping himself down with a washcloth, though Will knows he’s going to shower after this as well. “That was too much,” Hannibal’s saying though, to Will, it sounds like he’s underwater and Hannibal’s trying to speak to him from the surface. Will’s laying on his back, watching Hannibal with his eyes half-lidded. He feels satiated. He feels good. He feels empty. *No,* Will tells himself, *I feel good.* Though it sounds more like he’s trying to convince himself of something, rather than stating a fact. Will’s brain catches up to his ears and Will realizes what Hannibal’s said. He realizes also that Hannibal is looking at him, patiently awaiting a response.

“I want ‘too much’,” Will tells Hannibal simply.

Hannibal crouches down, to be eye level with Will. “You do not know what you want,” he says. Will feels like someone has lit him ablaze. He looks at Hannibal and realizes his hands are balled into fists in the duvet. He willfully unclenches them.

Will says, “Fuck you.”

Will climbs into the cab half-dressed. Hannibal did not chase him out of the apartment, like Will wished he would. He did insist on paying for the cab, which Will felt defeated the purpose of taking a cab in the first place. Will’s so mixed up. He’s still burning with anger at Hannibal, righteous, stricken, *rage*. But he also… He wanted to stay. He regrets leaving already, as he impolitely asks the driver to take him home, to St. Gabriel. Not home. Will, now, has no home. Maybe he never did.

He looks out the window the whole way back to St. Gabriel and tries to ignore the aches and pains left over from the sex. It's only slightly difficult. He’s long since memorized the route from Hannibal’s Florence apartment to St. Gabriel, in Montaione, but never has he watched it all with this air of finality. *This is the last time I will ever see these trees and houses and cobblestones in this order,* Will thinks and it seems so funny, so awful, that all he can think about in this moment is the trees. *It’s all gone to such shit,* Will thinks, *and all I can focus on is a lousy row of olive trees.* It hurts, is the truth. It hurts so bad, so big, that if Will touches it in his mind, truly grapples with it, it will consume him. He’ll never return to St. Gabriel. He’ll never return anywhere. He will drift through the world like a ghost, he will become untethered, he will… It will kill him.

So Will doesn’t think about it. Will thinks about the trees.

When Will returns to St. Gabriel, he heads to Gio's room before his own. He just wants to see her face, really. Maybe hear her say that everything will be okay. Will knows that, coming from her, he would almost believe it.

It's Tina, Gio's roommate, who opens the door. Her eyes are massive and watery. Will frowns, quickly breaking eye contact. "Where's Gio?" he asks, feeling discomforted by the sadness and worry and *fear* rolling off Tina in waves. Will shakes his head. *Everything will be okay,* he tells himself. Tina's bottom lip wavers, and she looks at the ground, whimpers, looks back up. She opens her mouth, hesitates, then says:

"Gio is missing."

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